
JASON HAMILTON
INTO STORM
ROOTS OF CREATION BOOK 4
AN EPIC YA FANTASY ADVENTURE

Into Storm

Roots of Creation Book 4

Jason Hamilton

Story Hobby Media

Copyright © 2018 by Jason Hamilton

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

An Argoverse Novel

www.argoforce.com

Story Hobby Media

www.storyhobbymedia.com

Publisher's Note: This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are a product of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual people, living or dead, or to businesses, companies, events, institutions, or locales is completely coincidental.

Cover art by Vanesa Garkova.

Contents

Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Chapter 22
Chapter 23
Chapter 24
Chapter 25
Chapter 26
Chapter 27
Epilogue

Author's Note
About the Author
Also by Jason Hamilton

1

"What are we going to do about that army?" Jak asked once everyone on the council had gathered. She met the eyes of each in turn, smiling slightly as she realized most of her closest friends were standing in this clearing near the river, some of them human, others representing the various species of Fae that were the main reason for their current predicament, though at no fault of their own. Most of them were new friends gained during her travels since leaving her hometown of Riverbrook, but that did not make them any less of a friend.

Across from her stood Skellig, formerly ranked as a major of the Watchers. She was their primary strategist and was the first to answer Jak's question. "Well, we can't meet them head on. Their numbers are too great, even with the unique gifts of the Fae. Our best bet would be to retreat into the mountain pass behind us and use the confined quarters to our advantage."

"I, for one, think we could stand a chance." This time it was Gabriel who spoke, standing next to Skellig. He was Jak's teacher, or at least he used to be. Jak wasn't exactly sure what he was to her now that they had both been driven out of Skyecliff. "After everything we've heard of about the abilities granted by the Pillar of Eternity, it's possible that Jak alone could defeat even an army of this size."

Jak glanced down at the smooth column of polished, black metal in her hand. It was wider at the top, with runes carved all the way down its length. Could it really do all of that? Stop an army? She had used it to save Skellig just weeks before, stopping time and getting the former Watcher to safety. But could it do the same long enough for her to defeat an entire army?

Jak's mother, a Shadow Fae who stood next to Jak spoke next. "I don't think we should put all our eggs in one basket like that. It's too much responsibility for one person."

The woman turned to look at her daughter, and Jak smiled in response. It was good to have her mother around, someone who would always listen if Jak needed it, and who cared for Jak regardless

of whether she deserved it or not.

"I agree," said Seph, who stood to the left of Jak. She turned to face him and returned the smile he flashed at her. Did her knees feel shaky or was that just the wind? Her good friend and resident preacher continued. "We can't place all the burden on Jak. We could use her abilities to our advantage, perhaps as a demonstration of what we're capable of. Though I'm not sure that will work on Telma."

Queen Telma was the leader of the army they faced just now, camped a mere two miles away from their position, where the base of the mountains met the plains. Jak had met the queen before, and agreed with Seph. She wasn't one to be intimidated lightly.

"Well we like the tall giant's idea," said another voice in the circle. All heads dipped to see the diminutive Girwirt standing next to his friend, Noralim. They were Fae of the Fire and Earth varieties, respectively, though they prefered to go by gnome and dwarf. "We're more at home in the mountains, and we could do a lot to help in holding back the army."

"Perhaps a compromise of some kind," said Yewin of the Bright Fae. He had discarded his traveling cloak and allowed his skin to radiate the light that was unique to his species of Fae. "We can prepare to enter the mountain pass, but while we are doing so send an emissary to the queen to find a peaceful solution. Should that fail, we can always rely on young Jak for a clear demonstration of what they will face should they attack. They must already know what we Fae are capable of, but the Pillar of Eternity will be a surprise to them."

A few heads nodded at this. Yewin, as always, was the best at finding reasonable solutions to such problems. It probably had something to do with his ability to perceive truth when he saw it.

No one else seemed to have any suggestions so all eyes turned on Jak to make the final call. Inwardly she could feel herself cringe at all their gazes, but outwardly she remained calm. She hadn't asked to be a leader of these people. She was only eighteen years old, and almost everyone in the clearing was older and had more experience. But they looked up to her, respected her, and so she had a responsibility that she would accept, no matter how unfit she felt for the role.

She glanced at the one person who hadn't said anything, her best friend in the circle, Amelia. Amelia was a Water Fae, though they had met as students before Amelia was transformed into a Water Fae by a Relic, all while in Skyecliff. Now, the girl had a long fish tail and only managed to stand shoulder to shoulder with the rest of them because of a long column of water that extended out of the nearby river, holding her in its grip. What the Water Fae lacked in mobility, they made up for in sheer power. Jak had seen an entire demon army swept away by waves, called forth by Amelia and her people.

Amelia still didn't say anything, but she met Jak's gaze evenly and smiled. It was an expression that said 'go on, you can do this' or 'I trust you.' It was all the encouragement Jak needed.

"I think you all bring up excellent points. Our first priority, regardless of what happens, should be to ready everyone for battle. That way we can retreat or fight, if need be, at a moment's notice."

Skellig nodded. "I'll start at once."

Jak returned the nod. "We might not be trained soldiers like you're used to, but if anyone can change that, it's you, Skellig."

Skellig didn't return Jak's smile, but she did stand a little straighter, clearly pleased with the compliment.

Jak turned her attention back to the rest of the group. "I like Yewin's idea of trying to meet with them. It might not result in anything, but we have to try. And at least it will buy us time. But I think only those of us who are still fully human should go."

"What? You think the rest of us aren't good enough?" That remark came from Girwirt, who had his arms folded in protest.

Jak raised an eyebrow at the gnome. "Of course you're good enough. We're all equal here. But you are certainly not equal in the eyes of the queen. I expect she would see your inclusion as an aggressive tactic rather than a peaceful one. If those of us who are not Fae go to meet her, she will probably be more willing to talk.

She glanced at Seph, who nodded in confirmation. Of everyone in the group, he was most familiar with Queen Telma. He was originally from a nation far to the east, which showed in his facial features, but had been adopted by the queen as a sign of peace between their kingdom and the eastern nations.

Seph hadn't said much about that time of his life, but Jak gathered that it was not pleasant. He had eventually run away and traveled east and north for a time in what turned out to be a spiritual journey. He'd come across the Book of Illadar, an ancient manuscript that told of the emergence of the Fae and he had realized his help was needed near his old home. So he returned and started a small movement that had eventually joined up with Jak and the Fae.

"Very well," said Skellig. "In that case, I suggest…" she began listing her recommendations for mobilizing, speaking to each member of the council in turn and giving them instructions for their particular portion of the army. Jak listened carefully, trying to see how Skellig coordinated. The former Watcher was a natural born leader. And their army wasn't exactly huge, but it was large enough that trying to coordinate everything from food to watch schedules was a lot for Jak to handle. Thankfully she had the talent of people like Skellig, and everyone else in the council, to lean on.

When Skellig finished, Jak officially ended their meeting and told

Seph, Gabriel, and Skellig to be ready in the morning when they would go visit the queen in the grasslands between their two armies.

When they had all returned to the camp, Jak found Seph and walked alongside him. “Do you know where I can find Elva?” she asked. “I have an assignment for her.”

“She’s probably near her tent, I’ll walk you there.”

Seph fell into step beside her and they didn’t speak for several moments while Jak racked her brain for something to say. But being this close to Seph kind of kept her from thinking straight sometimes. To her relief, he spoke first. “You did well over there. You’re becoming a true leader.”

Jak turned her face away to hide her blush. “Sometimes I feel like I’m drowning.”

“In what?”

“In…all of it. I had no idea of how much went into running an army like this. Just trying to coordinate waste disposal is enough to stress out a boulder.”

Seph laughed. “Well that’s why you have us.”

Jak turned her head to face him again, hoping that the redness in her cheeks had died down. “I know, and I’m grateful for that.”

“Remember, leadership isn’t about doing everything yourself. You have to rely on others.”

Jak nodded. She had learned that lesson the hard way back in Mt. Harafast when she tried to free the gnomes and dwarves from the Watchers and their leader, Cain. Her face darkened as she thought back to that horrifying experience. She would never have made it out without the aid of Skellig, Yewin, and others.

She wondered idly where Cain was now. She was sure he had somehow survived. A being of his magnitude could not be stopped by conventional means. It had taken a real-life dragon to even distract the man long enough for them to escape. And even with the power of the Pillar of Eternity, Jak wasn’t sure she could face him in combat and win.

“But I think you’re going to be fine,” Seph continued. “You gave each of us a chance to speak our mind, considered all the information, and made a logical decision.”

Jak thought she could feel the blood rushing to her face again. What was it about Seph? She wasn’t this way when anyone else complimented her. “I mean, it wasn’t exactly a difficult decision.”

“Perhaps not, but it demonstrated your competence as a leader, if only on a smaller scale. Keep that up and combine it with your rather inspiring abilities on the battlefield, and these people will follow you anywhere.”

Yes, her blush had definitely returned now. But just at that

moment she was saved from embarrassment as she caught sight of Elva, one of Seph's most loyal followers.

The woman had tanned skin that seemed to blend seamlessly with the color of her hair. The moment she saw them approach, she ran up to them and inclined her head.

"Any word from the council?" she said, keeping her head bowed.

"Yes, and I have a job for you," said Jak.

At that, Elva raised her eyes to meet Jak's. "I will do anything to help the cause. We will stamp out the oppression that threatens Illadar."

Jak fought the urge to shuffle her feet in discomfort. Looking to her as a leader was one thing, but people like Elva could sometimes go overboard in their devotion.

"We don't know if this is Illadar yet," said Seph. "Remember, Illadar is a place where the outside world will leave us in peace. We have yet to see that here, and we may be forced to leave if all does not go well."

Illadar was at the center of everything Seph preached, some mythical land of peace. Jak wasn't sure what she thought about the prophecies yet. The Book of Illadar had been right about a lot of things, and even appeared to be written by the brother of Cain, their enemy. But the descriptions of Illadar were vague. It was unclear whether it was a place or a state of mind. And what made her more uncomfortable about the prophecies was the fact that she apparently would have a hand in carrying them out.

"To most of us, Illadar is wherever the Fae gather," Elva responded to Seph. "It is a place we carry with us."

"Yes, well that's not why I wanted to see you," said Jak. Elva waited patiently so Jak continued. "We've decided to first try to make peace with the queen's armies. I need a messenger to inform them of our intent."

"I am ready to serve, great Oren." Elva said, inclining her head further to Jak.

"Um...Elva, that really isn't necessary. Just call me Jak."

Elva looked from her to Seph and back again. "Yes...Jak," she said as if forcing out the words. "What shall I tell the queen?"

Despite Elva's devotion, Jak admired her courage. She showed no signs of fear, no mention of the potential dangers in riding out to deliver a message. They all assumed the queen would respect the messenger, but in a situation like theirs, who knew if that would really be the case?

"Tell her that we will meet her to discuss her demands, in the grasslands just outside her army. Then return and bring us her answer."

Elva brought her brand hand up to her chest. “I will leave at once.”

Jak nodded and glanced at the sky to estimate the time. The sun was beginning to set. She turned back to Elva and said, “You can wait until the morning, but I’ll have a horse prepared for you.”

Elva bowed her head once again and retreated to prepare herself. Seph followed Jak as she headed back to the center of the camp where her tent lay.

“You seem uncomfortable,” he said as they walked.

“Perhaps you’re used to people who follow you blindly like that, but I’m not.”

“You think they follow us blindly?”

Jak turned to look at him. “Well, yes. I haven’t given anyone a reason to believe in me as much as she does.”

Seph shrugged his shoulders. “Perhaps some follow blindly, but I do not think that is the case for Elva, or indeed most of my followers.”

“Why not? They listen to every word you say without question. And me too now.”

“Remember what I taught on that first day when you came to visit my sermon.”

Jak thought back and her lip twitched. “I remember you put me on the spot.”

“Before that.”

After a pause, Jak said, “You talked about some all-knowing God, a guiding hand in our lives.”

“That’s right. The Book of Illadar teaches that our ancestors and the Relics they left behind are not worthy of our worship. Our ancestors were just like us, and the Relics are tools. Powerful tools, but just that.”

“And what does that have to do with blind faith?”

“Because if such a God exists, wouldn’t he make himself known unto us if we asked?”

Jak felt her brow furrow. “I don’t know. If that were the case wouldn’t everyone know about your God?”

They had arrived at Jak’s tent and came to a stop. Seph turned to face her. “It’s not all about finding proof in the sense that you’re thinking. The principles I teach come from this God. As we follow them we come to know they are true principles for ourselves. I also encourage everyone who follows me to simply ask him if he is real, and if Illadar and these doctrines are true.”

“And that works?” Jak folded her arms. She wasn’t doubting his words, but it was still a bit tricky to wrap her head around.

“Not for everyone, no. But for some, they come to know by their own experience that what the book says is true. And if those words are true, then you are an Oren, and you will deliver us to Illadar, no

matter what form that takes. It's a cascading effect. When you know one thing, you can trust in the rest. So it's not blind faith. It's an extension of that which they already know to be true."

Jak's gaze fell to the ground. "And what if they're wrong?" she asked. "What if this is all a misguided sham and I'm not the one to deliver them to this Illadar."

A gentle touch grasped her shoulders and she looked up to see Seph staring her squarely in the eye. "I think you know that's not true. Prophecy isn't set in stone, but we have already seen the fulfillment of so much. I believe in you."

The muscles in Jak's shoulders relaxed under his touch. "I'm willing to give it my best shot at least."

Seph flashed that dazzling smile and pulled her in for a hug. Surprising herself, she leaned into it, feeling her mind relax and her body melt against his warm embrace. His heart beat in a regular rhythm, slowly increasing, or was that hers? She was almost disappointed when he broke the hug a few moments later.

"You've been in worse predicaments before," he said, taking a few steps back and preparing to leave. "You can get through this one too."

Jak raised a hand to bid farewell as he strode off again towards his own tent. Well, he wasn't wrong about that. She *had* been in far worse predicaments. Getting stabbed by the Royal Priest in Skyecliff, facing a demon army at Foothold, not to mention being held at the mercy of Cain, the most powerful being she knew, possibly the most powerful being alive.

After speaking to a nearby aid about getting a horse for Elva, she raised the flap to her tent and stepped inside. It was a modest arrangement, with only a small chair and table sitting next to her cot. Their group didn't have the resources to do much else. But it was still far larger than what she was used to since leaving Riverbrook with the Watchers. And it was one of the largest tents in the camp. Everyone had insisted she take it.

She needed to get her mind off of the queen's army for a moment. That problem had been plaguing her since arriving from the east. She needed something to focus on.

Picking up a few wood chips she'd collected, she set about practicing her brands. Her first brand was still that of a Gifter, and she still couldn't perform all of the brands perfectly, though she was close. Gabriel had been teaching her more since she arrived. She could already perform a perfect Thunder, Hungerless, Sleeplessness, and Toughness brands. There were still many more to learn, including the elusive Telekinesis, so that's what she set to practicing now.

She tried hard not to think about Elva who would be heading to the queen's camp soon. She hoped the woman would get out of there

in one piece. She wished the same for herself and everyone.

2

"Jak, she's back." The voice of her mother brought Jak back to consciousness. Had she dozed off? Given how dark it was, she must have, and slept several hours too.

She blinked to see the glowing green eyes in the shadowy face of her mother. In the darkness, the eyes were about the only thing she could see. Shadow Fae were like that.

"Who...who's back?" she said as her vision adjusted to being awake.

"Elva, she returned from the queen's camp."

Instantly, sleep fled from Jak's mind. "Already?" She stood and brushed herself off. She'd fallen asleep in her clothes apparently, so she didn't need to dress. Instead, she followed her mother out of the tent and to the nearby clearing where they held their council meetings. Several of the others were already waiting. Gabriel and Skellig were both there, and Jak noted Amelia peeking her head out of the river. Elva stood in front of Skellig, dressed in leather armor and standing straight. She bowed her head in respect as Jak entered the clearing.

"I'm impressed," said Jak as she returned the gesture. "I didn't mean for you to leave immediately like that. You could have waited until this morning."

"Forgive me, but I felt it was prudent to not waste time," said Elva. "The longer we wait, the more chances the queen has to scheme."

Well that much was true. Once again she admired Elva's devotion. Jak could only hope to make it worth her while.

Once Seph and the rest arrived minutes later, Jak nodded at Elva. "Tell us what happened."

"The queen is willing to meet with you. And she agreed to do so just out of bowshot of both armies. She requested one day from now, at dawn." Elva's mouth went slack and she looked like she was deciding whether or not to add something. "Ah, she also specifically requested Master Seph accompany you."

Seph didn't look surprised. He huffed and shook his head. "I'll be

there," he said, though he was gritting his teeth.

Jak didn't like having to make Seph confront the woman for whom he clearly felt a deep disgust, but she had already planned on asking him to be there. No one knew the queen better than he, and Jak would need that expertise.

"Very well, we will meet with them tomorrow at dawn," she said. "Seph, Skellig, and Gabriel, can I count on you to be by my side?"

Each returned a nod, but Karlona spoke up beside Jak. "I know you said you don't want any Fae present. But you'll need some kind of protection in case she tries to double cross you. We can blend into the surroundings and help if needed."

Jak thought it through, but it did make sense. The Shadow Fae were almost impossible to find if they didn't want to be found. "I suppose that is acceptable. But you'll need to remain invisible from the time we leave camp. She might have Sightseers keeping watch on our camp."

Karlona acknowledged that with a nod, and Jak dismissed the group. She headed back to her tent. She could already feel her eyes drooping again. The sun hadn't yet touched the horizon so there was still plenty of time until the rest of the camp would arise. But just as she reached her tent, Elva caught up with her.

"Great Oren, I mean...uh, Jak." she said, coming closer. "I was hoping to discuss one thing with you in private."

Jak grimaced, knowing what was coming. "I've told you, Elva. I don't want to risk branding too many people, especially not until I'm sure I know each brand inside and out."

"But you've branded people before. You gave Skellig a Healing brand, and then that Watcher boy…"

"Those were emergencies," said Jak, not wanting to think about Naem right now. He had been the first she had ever branded, and they had been close for a time, until he betrayed her to the queen. He claimed to have done it under duress, but even that didn't take away the sting. He should have distanced himself from her, rather than trying to progress their relationship. And now he was gone, presumably still in Skyecliff. Perhaps he was even here, waiting to fight them in the queen's army.

Elva mistook her momentary distraction as hesitation. "Would we not all benefit from each ability? The Fae have advantages the rest of us can only dream of. Most of us only have a simple brand, not one that will help us go up against Flamedancers and Telekinetics."

"I will think on it." said Jak, though she didn't really mean it. There were already too many things to think about. This was one more thing that she simply didn't have the time for.

But as she bid a temporary farewell to Elva and tried to get more

sleep before the morning, she found she couldn't put it out of her mind. After all, Elva had a point. They would all be a lot more prepared if they had more brands to rely on.

Each Fae had their own advantages. The Bright Fae could manipulate light to blind the enemy and perhaps much more. The Water Fae could use the river to sweep their enemies away, which was perhaps the most powerful tool they had. The gnomes and dwarves could turn the earth into molten slag, which could be useful in providing a temporary barrier against the army. And the Shadow Fae could make themselves invisible. Most of the humans didn't have anything to compete with such abilities.

Though Elva was probably overreacting. If all went well, they wouldn't even have to lift a finger, right? The Water Fae alone could probably protect them and lead them out of harm's way. But of course, that argument wouldn't fly among Elva and the others. Jak knew all too well what it was like to feel helpless. She wouldn't want that, even if she was sure that others could save her.

She squirmed on her cot, trying to find sleep, but it wouldn't come. The dimmest light began to filter in from the flap of her tent. Dawn was already here. Just one more day until they met Queen Telma. Jak sighed and pushed herself up until she was sitting on the cot. She rubbed her eyes, trying to coax some moisture into them. She would just have to rely on her Strength brand to keep her upright today. It was good at that. But that didn't stop her head from throbbing from lack of sleep, or her stomach growling from the limited rations that they...

Jak stilled. What if Elva was right? Right then, she wanted nothing more than to go back to sleep. But what if she didn't have to?

Feeling slightly more alert now, she rose off her cot and pulled out her journal, which had somehow survived her last few adventures. Yewin had kept it safe while she had been a prisoner under the mountain, returning it to her once they were a safe distance away.

She leafed through the pages until she found the one she was looking for. Sleeplessness. She had performed it several times before, and Gabriel said he didn't see any faults with it, but it was also one of those brands that you couldn't know for sure until you performed it on a living being. Sleeplessness brands set into wood chips did nothing.

Jak swallowed. It had been a while since she'd given herself a brand. The last time it had been an emergency, to save her own life. And then there was that time just a few weeks ago when she'd done the same for Skellig. She'd always assumed that the overwhelming need had been part of what made them work. Could she do it without that urgent need? Should she wait until she was feeling more alert?

But no, now was as good a time as ever, and she'd done it successfully many times before.

Picking up one of her wood chips, she practiced the brand once, studying her notes on the brand beforehand. When the light on her Gifter brand faded, she observed the resulting Sleeplessness brand on the wood chip. As far as she could tell, there was nothing wrong about it. Well then, it was time to truly test that theory.

Trying hard not to think about what might happen if she got it wrong, she placed her right hand on her left arm and activated the Gifter brand once again. She let out a small gasp as a mild burning sensation stung that arm, above where her Gifter and Flamedancer brand lay.

The brand tingled as the lines connected into their completed shape. Confident that she had done it right, Jak let her magic die. What it left was a perfect Sleeplessness brand, a sort of long hexagon with some lines down the center.

Jak waited. Well, she wasn't turning into a demon, so that was a good first sign. And she did feel more alert. Actually, she felt a lot more alert, and oddly...peaceful. Why had she been so irritated earlier? She couldn't even remember now. Her anxiety was almost completely gone. This...this was a good feeling. Was this how she always felt when she was well rested? Had she ever even experienced what true rest felt like?

Quickly, she got into her day clothes. Her stomach rumbled again and she popped out of her tent in her eagerness to collect her rations for the day. But then she hesitated and turned back to go inside. If she felt this much better from one brand, what about some of the others. There were plenty that she'd done before. Could she perhaps try Hungerless? It would help save rations for others in the camp who needed it.

She sat back down and turned her journal to the correct page. Hungerless was another of the passive brands that required no training to use. With it, she'd only have to eat about once a week, if that.

Jak could already feel Gabriel rebuking her, telling her that they didn't know how the different brands would react together, that there could be consequences they didn't know about. But Jak put that out of her mind. Gabriel was right about some things, but she already had far more dangerous brands like Flamedancer. If something was going to go wrong, it would have happened when she first gave herself that brand.

Once again she activated her Gifter brand and imagined the new Hungerless brand becoming a part of her. This time she felt the pain in her left collar bone. She looked down to see the Hungerless brand

settle itself into her flesh. This one had the appearance of an odd-looking star.

Jak immediately felt the strain in her stomach lessen, and her urge to visit the cook diminished. This was amazing. How many of these brands could she give herself? And what could she do with all of them? She had almost forgotten about Elva and her requests. But she supposed now that she had given herself these brands they were probably safe for others. These latest two could be very useful to their little group, at least for the humans. Some already had one or the other. Elva already had Hungerless for example. Many from less fortunate families had Hungerless. It was one of the few brands that could help you financially. Many avoided starvation because of it.

Without the need to eat that morning, she stayed sitting and leafed through her journal, coming to rest at the one brand that seemed to elude her. Telekinesis.

She wasn't stupid enough to try it on herself just yet. Telekinesis was one of the hardest brands to perform, and it was usually reserved for more advanced-level Gifters. She hadn't been doing this for very long, but Gabriel said she was better than any other student at her age. That was something.

Picking up one of her woodchips, she concentrated hard, willing the Telekinesis brand to form. It did so, the crisscross of lines almost shaped like a bird in flight. As the brand took hold, Jak couldn't see anything wrong with it. It looked just like the illustrations in her journal, which Gabriel said were accurate.

But as soon as the brand finished forming, the woodchip leapt out of her hand and hung several feet in the air. A clear sign that the brand had not worked.

Jak blew out a lungful of air. She simply could not figure out what was wrong here. The lines were perfect, she was imagining its formation accurately, and the lines formed in the right order. What was she missing?

She tried again several times, but with the same result. She would have to get more wood chips soon.

Sighing, she rose to her feet. Perhaps she needed more instruction from Gabriel. She hadn't had any lessons in the last two days, since she started helping with strategy. It might be good to see if he had any more suggestions on what to do.

She finally exited her tent for that morning and shielded her eyes against the sun rising in the east. Gabriel's tent wasn't far, so it only took a few moments to get there.

3

When Gabriel wasn't at his tent, she went looking for him at the makeshift commons area where a few tables had been set up for food. Several soldiers and Fae were there already eating their breakfast, a simple soup with not much more than water and some fish caught from the nearby river. Jak quickly spotted Gabriel and ran to meet him. She did her best to ignore all the eyes that followed her everywhere. They never let her forget that she was unique among them.

"Hello, Jak," said Gabriel as she sat across from him. He waved over at the cook, one of the gnomes who handed a bowl to Jak. "Have some soup, it's almost palatable."

Jak ignored the comment. "Could you watch me do a Telekinesis brand again? I'm sure we're missing something."

Gabriel set down his spoon. "I can, but I've told you before, Jak, you're doing everything correctly."

"That can't be true, otherwise it would work." said Jak.

"Well, not necessarily." said Gabriel, wiping his chin with his sleeve. "You see, each brand requires far more than just imagining the brand correctly. There are feelings and intentions that play a part."

"I know that. With Telekinesis you have to imagine floating in empty space and push out all sensations. But I'm doing that. I'm sure I'm imagining it right."

"And I'm sure that's true, however, that's not all there is."

Jak leaned in, eager for something new to fix her problem. "Yes," she coaxed.

"Well sometimes people can get...shall we say...blocked."

Jak's eyebrows knit. "What do you mean?"

"The brands come from a place within each of us. On some level, our conviction is what fuels them. That is why I was so surprised that you were even able to activate your Gifter brand so soon after receiving it. Many do not learn to do it for some time because it takes a great deal of introspection and determination."

"But I can perform the brands, I've been successful with most of

them."

"Yes, but in more rare cases, the block can occur around a single brand, or just a few. Perhaps there is something mentally preventing you from using Telekinesis."

Jak frowned and tapped her fingers on the table in thought. "I can't think of anything."

"I can." said Gabriel immediately. Jak looked at him and he spread his hands to either side. "Well think about it, your father was a Telekinetic, and you witnessed his death. And it wasn't a peaceful death either. That single event launched you into the experiences that made you what you are."

Jak swallowed. She didn't like to think about that day, especially now that they were so close to Riverbrook. It wasn't far on the other side of the river, perhaps a mile or two. She hadn't been there yet to visit her father's grave, a grave she herself had made. Her mother apparently went before Jak arrived. She encouraged Jak to go, but she had more important things to worry about right now.

Gabriel continued, "Now I'm not sure what form that would play in your mental block. Perhaps you are still traumatized by those events and…" he broke off and met her eyes. Jak didn't realize that they were welling up with tears until one fell onto her cheek. She wiped it away and tried to act like nothing was wrong. "Forgive me," Gabriel said. " I would not presume to guess on such a painful subject for you. But it is something you may have to discover on your own."

Great. Another thing to think about, and one of the last subjects she ever wanted to approach. Oh well, she would worry about it later, after the queen's army was no longer a threat.

"Seriously, get some soup," said Gabriel, trying to change the subject. "It's really not bad this morning."

"I'm not hungry," said Jak with a wave of dismissal.

"Child, I understand the need to ration, but you of all people need your strength for what is…" he broke off as Jak raised a hand to her neck line and pulled down her tunic just enough for Gabriel to see the new Hungerless brand that lay there. His eyes went wide. "You gave yourself another one?"

To his credit, he didn't say anything about how dangerous and reckless that had been. Jak nodded. "Sleeplessness as well."

Gabriel stared at her for some time, his soup forgotten, as if trying to sort through many thoughts racing in his head. "Well, you seem to be fine. No side effects I assume?"

Jak shook her head. "I feel great, physically at least."

"Yes, well. I suppose that's a good thing. Just be careful with some of the others. Perhaps if you asked Yewin to help."

"The link is dangerous," Jak said. "True, it makes it easier for me

to know what to do. After all, it helped me brand Naem long before I could create a stable brand on my own. But it almost killed Yewin."

"But what you said about how you obtained the Pillar of Eternity…"

"That was necessary at the time. And it only worked because there were many Fae linked together. If I had kept the link open, they would have died, like many of their brothers and sisters already had."

"Very well," said Gabriel, going back to his soup. "Just promise me you won't try Telekinesis until we're very certain it works for you."

Jak nodded. "I promise. I don't want to end up floating five feet above the ground anyway." She winked at Gabriel, who chuckled and took the last few spoonfuls of his soup. Jak watched him eat, marvelling at how little hunger she felt.

"Elva wants me to brand her and some of the others." she said after a while.

Gabriel put down his bowl, empty now. "And you're wondering if it's a good idea."

Jak nodded. "Part of me doesn't want to risk it, but another part can acknowledge that it would be incredibly helpful. At the very least we could cut back on the rations."

"Do you think you're up to the job?" Gabriel asked.

"Maybe. I did successfully give Skellig a Healing brand. We haven't seen any signs that it's harmful."

Gabriel nodded. "Ultimately, I think that decision is yours to make. You know the risks of turning someone, but you are also something we haven't seen before in recent history. You miraculously have the gift of giving more than one brand. Perhaps it would be best to use that gift to its fullest. But I, for one, will not blame you if you choose otherwise. That is not a decision that anyone can make for you."

Jak stood, feeling a new strength filling her that had nothing to do with her brands. "Thank you, Gabriel."

"Anytime, Jak." he said, choosing that moment to stand up himself. "I know you have a lot on your plate right now, but I trust you."

Ordinarily, Jak would have grimaced at the remark. People kept saying it to her lately. But right now she had other things to think about. With a last farewell to Gabriel, she made her way to where Seph and his followers generally stayed.

Once there, it didn't take her long to make her way to Elva's small tent. She peeked her head inside and found the woman asleep. Well that made sense. She had been out all night sending their message to the queen. She was about to leave and come back later, when Elva's voice spoke up.

"Lady Oren?" she muttered, blinking at the light coming through

the tent flap. She cleared her throat. “What can I do for you?”

“It’s what I can do for you that brings me here,” said Jak. “I’m sorry to wake you, but I have something you’ll want to hear.”

In an instant, Elva was on her feet. Jak smiled as she saw the glimmer of hope on the woman’s face. “Yes?” was all she said, but her eyes never left Jak’s.

“I have decided to give additional brands to you and any others you trust.”

Elva breathed out a long sigh that ended in a choking sob. Or perhaps it was laughter. She breathed in again as if not finding the right words to say, and brought her hands up to cup her own face.

Jak couldn’t help but smile. “It’s okay, you can say something.”

“Thank you so much, Lady Oren. I will do what I can to be worthy of your gifts.”

“I do have some conditions,” Jak said. “Only people that you or Seph personally know and trust, and I’m only giving passive brands. No Flamedancer or Telekinesis.” She didn’t mention that she couldn’t even perform the latter. She didn’t want to give Elva too many doubts of her abilities.

Elva nodded. “Those are acceptable terms.” She didn’t even bat an eyelash at not getting the more weaponized brands. That was good. She wasn’t power hungry at least.

“Gather a handful of the others and come see me in one hour,” Jak said, turning to go back to her tent. “At the council circle. And try not to make a scene. I suppose people will find out about it eventually but for now I don’t want everyone crowding around my tent asking for more brands.”

Elva’s eyes glinted. “Of course, we wouldn’t want that,” she said, knowing full well that was exactly what she had done.

An hour later, Jak sat on the stump in the small clearing near the river where they held their council meetings. Across from her stood Elva and about twelve others she had brought. That was a few more than Jak wanted, but she supposed she could still do what she needed to do. Branding that many people with several brands each would probably drain her, but it might be worth it. She could see the eagerness in each of their eyes. Not the eagerness of greed or lust for power, but the eagerness of a child about to receive a present on their naming day.

Seph was also standing beside them, as was Gabriel, who had figured out what Jak was doing not long after she left him. He didn’t caution her, for which Jak was grateful. He knew that she understood the risks of what she was about to do.

“You all know why you’re here?” She asked them. A chorus of nods greeted her. “And you all realized the potential danger of what I

can do?"

Again, each of them nodded, still with that eager look in their eyes. Jak went on. She had to make sure they fully understood the worst case scenario here. "If I fail, you will either die or become a demon, after which we would be forced to kill you."

Nothing but resolute stares. Jak met the eyes of each person in the group. None had even the barest hint of hesitation in their eyes. Elva, most of all, stood eager and ready. Seph had his arms folded to the side, watching closely but saying nothing. He had elected not to have a brand, though not because he was against them. Instead he...actually Jak wasn't exactly sure why. He hadn't talked about it much.

Jak offered a hand to Elva. "I think it's only fitting that you go first."

Elva let out another breath and knelt next to the stump. Once again, that uncomfortable feeling entered Jak's chest as she saw Elva all but worship her, kneeling to her like this. The way the woman looked at Jak, it was like she was a queen. No, more than a queen. But what, Jak didn't know. What she did know was that Elva was loyal, perhaps more so than any other person in her camp. And that deserved something in return.

Jak concentrated, speaking her truth to her Gifter brand, allowing it to activate. The dark lines on her left hand turned suddenly a bright white. Jak conjured an image in her mind, one of several dark lines converging to a point and a small circle at the end. She imagined the shape as a complete object, as something whole and immovable. That was how you imagined a Healing brand.

Elva's sharp intake of breath signalled to Jak that the brand was taking hold. She looked down at the woman's hand to see the black lines of the Healing brand etch into Elva's skin, just above her first brand of Hungerless.

Finally, Jak let her magic die, and Elva was left with a second brand. For a moment, no one said anything. They were all waiting to see what would happen. Would Elva turn into a demon, or had Jak been successful?

Jak, however, knew from the moment the brand had finished coalescing on Elva's skin that it had worked. She had performed that brand countless times by now. It was one of the first taught at the College of Skyecliff, and she had already given it to Skellig several weeks earlier. The brand was a success.

Elva stared down at her hand, her eyes wide, waving her fingers as if not believing what she saw. Then tears began to stream down her face, and she flung herself at Jak. She nearly recoiled but instead wrapped her arms around the woman, letting her share her gratitude. "Thank you!" Elva sobbed into Jak's shoulder. "Thank you so much.

You don't know what this means to me."

Jak could admit, Elva was right on that count. It was only a brand, after all. It wouldn't save her from a mortal wound or anything. Elva's reaction did seem a bit much, but she had been asking for this ever since Jak returned from Mt. Harafast. Jak supposed it must have been important to her.

"Hang on," she said, catching Elva's arm as she broke the embrace and was about to return to her spot among the others. "I'm not done."

Elva's eyes widened as Jak activated her Gifter brand again and began working on the Toughness brand. That would give Elva a much needed edge in battle, making it harder for her bones to break or her skin to rupture. With Toughness, one could fall from fifty feet and walk away without a scratch. When that was finished, Jak followed up with Sleeplessness, another useful passive brand. Now Elva would only need a few hours of sleep a week, if that.

Elva already had Hungerless, so she stopped at those three brands. "I'm afraid that's all I will do for now," she said to a now speechless Elva. The woman nodded and took a few steps back to join her comrades. She didn't look at them though, instead she was staring at her left arm where all four of her brands now lay.

The others crowded in around Elva to get a closer look, some in awe, others with what looked like relief that Elva was still herself. Jak could identify with that.

"Who's next?" Jak called out to the others.

They could not have lined up faster. One by one they offered their arms to Jak. All of them already had one brand or another. Some had Hungerless like Elva, a common brand for low-born citizens. Others had Toughness or Strength. One young man even had Thunder, which surprised Jak. Thunder wasn't one she saw often, seeing as Flamedancing was usually the more effective of the two, unless there was a storm present.

She gave brands to each of them, making sure they all had Healing, Toughness, Hungerless, and Sleeplessness. Those were the most important passive brands. Perhaps in the future she would allow for some others, but she didn't want to unwittingly provide a weapon to someone who would use it for harm.

After about a half-hour later, she had finished giving out all of the brands. As she expected, she felt exhausted, though she also felt a strange elation, like a burden had been lifted off her shoulders. Sure, she was still an Oren, the only person in their company who could give multiple brands. But that responsibility seemed somehow diminished now that others had these extra abilities. Not everything lay on her anymore. At least, not as much as there had been before.

"Rest up," she said to each of them. A few of them chuckled. They

wouldn't need rest now that they had Sleeplessness. She caught Seph's eye, and he smiled at her. This was a good thing she had done today. "I'm serious," she said, addressing them again. "Don't let your brands make you cocky. Tomorrow we face the queen."

4

Even from a clear distance, Jak could see the queen. She sat on horseback several hundred yards ahead of them, along with a handful of her personal guard, and likely a few counselors too. Jak sat on a horse with Skellig on another. Seph sat behind her, and Gabriel behind Skellig. A few bodyguards surrounded them but they had come on foot, since they had very few horses. They didn't need the human bodyguards necessarily, since they also had the Shadow Fae invisible at their sides, but they needed to keep up appearances at least.

Jak swallowed as they continued to approach the queen's entourage. This was not an encounter she looked forward to, but it was necessary if they wanted a chance at a peaceful resolution to all of this. They had huge advantages with what the Fae were capable of, but the queen's army was much larger, and Jak didn't want to test their capabilities in battle.

A gust of wind sent Jak's hair flying behind her, and the chill air gave her goose flesh. The Shadow Fae were close around them but she couldn't help the feeling that they were too exposed. The queen's army was still far behind the queen herself, and they could see nothing else in all directions but the river to their left and the empty grasslands to their right.

No, she had the advantage here, even if the queen didn't know it. She tightened her grip on the staff that lay in her hands, the Pillar of Eternity. The queen would know nothing about it, about what it could do. Jak still wasn't even sure she knew. But she was sure that if she needed it, the power would come to her as it had on the slopes of Mt. Harafast. She hadn't tested it since, but she could feel the power humming just below the sleek surface of the staff. It waited to be called.

Yes, the queen had no idea what she was dealing with.

Jak increased her pace, taking long strides until they closed the distance between themselves and the queen. As they approached, the queen met Jak's eyes from her own horse. Jak met that stare.

The queen's face was obscured behind a small veil, something she

had been known to use in public. Her riding outfit looked like it was made of the most expensive leathers and silks, but it was also practical for riding. She wore no headdress but her hair was pulled back in a tight bun and pinned with a golden brooch.

"I'm surprised you actually came," said the queen, peering down at Jak. "And without your pets."

Jak bristled, "They're people, and of course I came. I want a peaceful solution as much as anyone."

"And yet, you continue to amass a rebellion against me."

"That's not what this is."

"Is it not? How else should I interpret a gathering of known hostiles in a place like this?" Her voice was pitched higher than Jak remembered. Was she perhaps scared?

Movement from one of the others distracted Jak. She turned her head to see one of the queen's dignitaries or advisors. Jak didn't recognize him, but what caught her off guard was that the man seemed to be shaking. He looked...terrified. Something was wrong.

"Jak," Seph whispered from behind her. "That's not the queen."

"What?" she said aloud, and began to turn her head to face him, when more movement caught her eye. The bodyguards next to the queen began sprinting forward, their fingers reaching for her. She leapt back just in time.

"Get her!" The queen yelled and turned her horse back. Yes, now that Jak was listening, that definitely wasn't the queen's voice. No wonder she used that veil. She was hiding her true face. The real queen probably used it in public to keep people from knowing what she actually looked like.

From all around them, gray figures seemed to flow out of the grass where they had been hiding. A few dozen at least. They had been waiting for them.

The figures pushed forward, spooking the horses and knocking the nobles off as they did so. These were no ordinary guards. Their faces were hooded, and they were cloaked from head to toe in a shimmering gray that blended into the dim light of dawn. Few could have spotted them crouched in the grasslands. Only their hands were uncovered, and their fingers reached for Jak as they ran forward. Jak stumbled backward in an attempt to get away.

The closest of them stopped in his tracks, his fingers mere inches from reaching Jak. Grunting, he strained against some invisible force that held him back. Then one of the Shadow Fae was there, materializing out of thin air.

The gray-clad figure hesitated only for a moment before grabbing the Fae securely by the arm. With a sickening sizzle, the Shadow Fae screamed and died before Jak's very eyes.

These men were Blood-burners.

"Don't let them touch you!" Jak cried as she sent a spurt of flame flying at the nearest attacker. He dodged and came at her along with several of his companions. Jak could hear Skellig shouting something, but she didn't have time to listen as she fended off her attackers with waves of flame magic. But from the way they avoided her attacks, one would think they also had brands of Grace. These were elite warriors, trained killers. And there were many of them.

That left Jak with only one option.

Feeling the cool hum beneath her fingers, Jak called on the magic of the Pillar of Eternity. Time froze around her in an instant, and Jak breathed a sigh of relief as she stared at those bare fingers of the assassin in front of her. Another second and those fingers would have found her throat.

She straightened and looked around her. Skellig was fighting off one assassin with her own burst of flame magic, with Gabriel and Seph behind her. Most of the assassins were gathered around Jak, though. They knew she was the greater threat. That was good.

Jak could tell from the slow movement of Skellig's flame attack, that time wasn't completely still. It had just slowed considerably. She had to act.

Doing her best to avoid touching the skin of the Blood-burners, she pushed each of them away from where Skellig and the others stood. It felt like trying to move a large object through water, but it was effective. For an instant, she let the magic drop and as time resumed each of the assassins went flying in the direction she had sent them. Cries of surprise echoed across the clearing as each one arced through the air. They were cries of pain as well. Many clutched their sides as they fell. Jak winced. She had probably broken some bones when she pushed them at that speed. She would have to be careful when using this magic.

Once she was sure that the attackers were all down, she activated the magic again, barely giving Skellig and the others a chance to look confused at what had just happened. This time, Jak turned to face the enemy camp. It was time she had a little chat with the queen, the real queen.

In no particular rush, she strode ahead towards her enemies. On the way, she passed the decoy queen, frozen in time as she galloped back as fast as her horse could take her.

It was a strange sensation, entering the enemy camp and staring around at all the soldiers frozen like statues around her. No sounds came from any direction, which was perhaps the most unnerving part of using the Pillar of Eternity.

Finding the queen's tent was no problem at all. Hers was the

biggest, and it stood in the center. Jak lifted the flap to enter, and nearly bumped into a man standing just inside. She quickly ducked to one side to avoid pushing him over. Whoever he was, he must have been talking to the queen, who sat on the other side of the room, dressed in garb similar to what her double wore at the meeting with Jak. Her face bore a calculated expression. She had been listening intently to what the man had been saying. A few guards surrounded the queen, but they wore ceremonial armor. The queen didn't expect to be attacked here.

Jak walked over to the guards and gave them each a soft push to the chest armor. She tried not to push too hard, but the metal armor did give way a little bit as she pressed inward. She stopped before it got bad enough to do any lasting damage to the guards. The other man was a different story. He didn't wear any armor, so pushing him at her current speed would likely break some bones. Instead, she grabbed the tent flap and wrapped it around the man, careful not to jostle him too much.

Then in a moment, she let the magic fall.

The guards hurtled backward into the side of the tent, causing it to billow outward as they shot past. Their impact pulled at the trappings and might have brought the tent crashing down had it not been so large and fully secured. The other man's confused and muffled cries came from behind the tent flap that Jak had wrapped around him.

The queen thrust out her hands in the chaos but in a split-second, she laid eyes on the culprit. Jak stood facing her, the Pillar of Eternity gleaming in the light that filtered through the tent flaps, and a slight smile on her lips. The look on Queen Telma's face was extremely satisfying.

Jak raced forward and grabbed the queen firmly in one hand. Telma tried to draw her hand away, but Jak's brand of Strength made it easy to hold her in place. But by now, the queen's bodyguards were beginning to recover, scrambling out of the chaos of tent flaps and coming at Jak with all the speed they could muster. It would not be fast enough.

With a tap of the Pillar of Eternity on the ground, Jak once again activated its magic. This time, as she was still connected to Telma, she brought the queen with her into that frozen slice of time. The guards remained still, dirt hanging in the air at their feet, kicked up as they had scrambled to apprehend Jak.

Telma looked all around her, true fear evident on her face. That was the first time Jak had ever seen her afraid. Yes, quite satisfying indeed.

5

After a moment, Telma began pulling away from Jak, trying to loosen her grip on her arm.

"I wouldn't let go unless you want to be suspended in time like the others," said Jak. The queen's struggling lessened. "I just came to talk."

"What have you done to my men?" The queen said. All hint of fear was gone from her face, replaced by cool stillness. Yes, she was Royalty through and through, used to putting on a mask, hiding all emotion from those she considered beneath her.

"They're fine. I merely froze time to give you and I a second to talk."

The queen's cool facade broke for a second. "How have you accomplished this? Is this some new sorcery that you've discovered." She glanced down at her arm, where Jak held her in a tight grip. "And passed through physical touch, apparently." She said the words almost as if to herself.

Jak stopped herself from rolling her eyes. "Listen, I know you want the people to believe I'm a heretic, but you can drop the charade. We're alone. I have you at my mercy, but I'm not doing anything to harm you. If I was as bad as you say, I would have killed you before you even knew I was here. I could do it too."

The queen's face grew a bit paler. "Very well. Let's talk then. Though I can't promise we will get very far with my life being at your mercy like this. It will be a one-sided negotiation."

"That's the idea, my ladyship." Jak emphasized the title with a hint of distaste in her voice. "Look, we've done nothing to harm you. And we have no intention of doing so at any point in the future. All we want is to be left alone."

"Perhaps, but can you guarantee that for all that follow you? And what about when you're dead and gone? What about hundreds of years from now? I have to think about the big picture here, girl, something that you seem to know nothing about."

Jak pursed her lips. It was true that she couldn't guarantee the Fae

wouldn't one day rise up against the queen, or the queen's successor at least.

The queen, sensing Jak's hesitation went on. "Think about it from my perspective. One to one, your Fae are more powerful than most humans, even those with advanced abilities. If any of them were to get it into their heads to rule the kingdom, chances are they could do so. Especially if and when their numbers grow. You can't blame me for wanting to stamp out a threat like that before it begins."

"Of course I can," Jak said. "And I think you would find that welcoming them into your society as people, because they were once humans like yourself, would be a much more effective way of keeping them on your side. We only fight when provoked."

"And what would happen if we did welcome them as one of our own. How long would that peace last, ten years, twenty, a hundred? Sooner or later, one of your Fae will get it into their heads that their power gives them the right to rule. Power corrupts, young one. Something you are yet learning."

Jak stopped herself from saying, 'and something that you know all too well.' Instead she tried pulling on another thread. "Let's say you're right, and somewhere down the line you or your successors are overthrown. Would it really be so bad to have a Fae leader? I mean, who's to say that the government should be nothing but human. Perhaps with more representation in your council…"

But the queen was already shaking her head. "It would become nothing more than a struggle for power. And as the Fae numbers grow, humans would likely diminish in our ability to fight them, to stand up for ourselves. You want equality? You would create a circumstance where humans would be the lessers, the oppressed ones. When one group's power exceeds that of another, it's only a matter of time before the weaker party is pushed out of existence. That is the law of survival."

Jak shook her head. "I really don't think that will be the case."

"Don't you? It's happening already. Look at us, now. You have all the cards, and I am at your mercy. You want peace for your people but have already threatened my life if I don't give you what you want. You've given me no choice but to comply with your demands."

For the first time, Jak hesitated. Was the queen right? Could all of this be the beginning of the end for human civilization? But no, Jak didn't believe that. There had to be a way for humans and Fae to peacefully coexist. Sure, there would be some that sought for dominion over others, but if everyone worked together as a single unit, a single people, they could all work together to stamp out such perceived superiority.

"Look," she said. "I'm not here to discuss philosophy."

“Clearly,” the queen said, flatly.

Jak ignored her. “Ultimately the future is still uncertain, and it will take time to come up with sustainable plans for what we would do in the situations you describe. But we do have control over what we do now. The Fae follow me. I can reasonably say that they will honor any agreement between us. Can you say the same?”

The queen took a deep breath, measuring Jak with her eyes. “My troops will follow me, for now. I can’t speak for every citizen under my rule. Some may be a bit...disgruntled by your Fae. Particularly those who have lost loved ones to them, or to demons.”

“Tell them that holding a grudge will get them killed.” Jak said, but something else caught her attention about what the queen had said. “So you admit that they’re different from demons?”

“I will admit whatever gets my people to do what I want. Perhaps they’re demons, perhaps they’re not. What matters is what people do with that information, either way.”

Jak’s lip curled. “I stand for truth.”

“Well of course you do girl, because you are naive. Truth will not always lead you to the ideal solution. It will not govern a kingdom. It does not motivate. You will find that out soon enough.”

Jak shook her head. This was going nowhere. “Let’s discuss my terms then. I want you to withdraw your armies and leave us in peace. I also want you to release any other Fae you may have in captivity. They and anyone else who wishes to join us may do so.”

The queen pursed her lips. “Hefty terms. And what would I get in return? Or do you plan to threaten my life again if I don’t live up to your demands?”

“In return, I will promise that we will not try to overthrow your rule or harm anyone within your borders.”

“And you truly believe you are capable of enforcing that rule?”

Jak closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Was she biting off more than she could chew? She opened her eyes again to face the queen. “I do.”

The queen considered her for a moment, but then to Jak’s immense relief, nodded. “Very well. If you can guarantee the safety of my troops and citizens from your Fae and those who follow you, then we have an accord. I will release all Fae in my possession and leave you be.”

“Thank you,” Jak said, surprised that the queen was agreeing so easily. Had she missed something?

“But be warned, when you break that promise, our agreement will be null and void. And there will not be a second chance. Next time I will eradicate you or we will all die in the attempt.”

“*If* we break that promise,” Jak corrected. She did not like how

certain the queen was that they would eventually attack her or the people unprovoked. She knew the Fae. All of them. And even though most had suffered at the hands of the queen or her servants, most just wanted to be left alone. They had enough problems to deal with. A war against humans wasn't one.

"We shall see," said the queen, unconvinced. "Are we done here?" She raised her arm, the one Jak still held in her grip, silently indicating that she should let go.

"I want to see your agreement in writing."

The queen nodded. "I'll have a scribe draft several copies of a treaty and then we'll both sign. Will that satisfy you?"

Jak hesitated before nodding. "I'll meet you tomorrow at the same place we were supposed to speak today. No tricks this time."

With an acknowledging tilt of her head, the queen said, "no tricks."

Jak let go of the queen's arm.

With the magic of the Pillar of Eternity still active, the queen froze the moment Jak's hand left her skin. Jak stared at the woman for a while, considering. She still didn't trust the queen, especially not when Jak had cornered her like this. Telma was right that Jak hadn't given her much of a choice. But it was a start. Perhaps if they could keep to themselves, she could convince everyone else to leave them alone. It wasn't a perfect peace, but it was something.

Turning, she passed the man still entangled in the tent flap and stepped outside. She had to get back to Seph, Gabriel, Skellig, and the Shadow Fae before she let the magic drop. Already she was starting to feel fatigued, much as she had after giving out all those brands the day before. Could the Pillar's magic also take a similar physical toll on her?

She made her way back the way she had come. It wasn't long before she saw Skellig and the others ahead of her. A few Shadow Fae had materialized as well. The assassins clothed in gray were back on their feet, but hadn't had enough time to resume their attack on her comrades.

She looked from one to another. She could try pushing them again, but these were Blood-burners so touching them again was a bad idea. She supposed she could try and talk with them, and convince them that the queen had allowed them to live. But first she should get her friends out of the way first.

She started with Seph, lightly grabbing his hand. He jumped as the touch seemingly froze time around him, and at seeing Jak suddenly materialize before him. But his eyes quickly grew in understanding as he observed the staff in her hand.

"So this is what the magic is like. Spectacular. I suppose that

explains why they all went flying for no apparent reason."

"I've just spoken with the queen."

"Of course you have," he flashed his smile at her. "I mean, what else would you be doing when we're attacked by Blood-burners."

"I can explain later at the council, but we've made a tentative arrangement. She's promised not to attack us."

Seph frowned. "And you believe her?"

"No, but what choice do we have? It's the only chance we have for peace, at least for now."

Seph nodded. "We can discuss it later. What do we do about these guys?" He indicated the assassins around them.

"I'll convince them that attacking would be foolish. But I wanted to get you and the others a safe distance away before I tried."

Seph grinned. "Your concern for our safety is touching. What would we do without you?" Was he serious or teasing her? Sometimes it was hard to tell with Seph.

She chuckled, however, and led Seph by the hand back towards their camp. Seph's hand felt warm in her own. They had never held hands before, and this obviously wasn't *that* kind of hand holding. Of course not, they were just friends. It was a bit awkward though, and she resisted the urge to let go. She didn't have to resist very hard.

Once they were about a hundred yards away, she reluctantly left and returned to get Skellig, Gabriel, and the Shadow Fae that she could see. Finally, she turned one last time to face the assassins. With a sharp tap of the staff on the ground, she let the magic fall, feeling a wave of relief as she did so. Holding onto that magic had been getting harder.

The assassins burst into motion, but most soon stopped in confusion, looking around to see where their prey had fled. It didn't take long for their eyes to find her.

"Stop!" Jak yelled. She had to look intimidating. She could do that, right? She took a powerful stance and waved the Pillar of Eternity over her head. "I hold power you cannot dream about."

One of the men in gray ran at her, his fingers outstretched. Jak sighed and activated her magic again. Time stood still and she walked around the oncoming assassin before letting time resume. Then she kicked the man in the back, sending him tumbling forward. Activating her magic once more, she walked to a spot on the other side of the men in gray before extinguishing the magic of the staff. To the eyes of the assassins, she would have just disappeared, reappeared behind the attacker, kicked him, then disappeared once more.

From behind them, she spoke again, " You have failed, and if you try to hurt me, you will fail again." They spun, only just realizing that she stood behind them. "I am giving you a chance to return to your

queen with your lives."

They still hesitated. Perhaps one more display of power would convince them. She froze time once again, returning to where she originally stood. "You don't know what you're dealing with," she bellowed once time resumed. "Leave now, and…"

But something was happening. One of the assassins was struggling, trying to move, but something held him in place. Jak squinted to see if she was seeing correctly in the dim morning light.

The ground around the assassin was actually rising, clumps of dirt and grass enveloped the man's feet, pinning him in place and continuing up to his thighs.

"Wha…" the man spoke in a panicked tone. "What is happening?"

He struggled and tried to move, but couldn't as the ground around him rose to his waist. Before Jak or any of the others could react, it had swallowed him whole, leaving a lump of dirt in its wake.

Jak stood, paralyzed by confusion. What had just happened?

One of the assassins leaped forward to help his companion, but just as he did so, another of them cried out. Heads turned to see another one being consumed from the feet up by earth. It rose and eventually his cries ceased as the earth surrounded his head. For a moment, there was no sound. The clearing stood almost as silent as when Jak made use of the Pillar of Eternity. A few of the men gazed at Jak through the slits in their gray clothing. Jak had nothing to say. What could she say? She had no more idea of what was happening then they did.

Then the assassins turned and ran.

"Wait!" Jak called after them. "That wasn't me, I don't know what is happening."

But the assassins did not pause. They did not stop to attempt a rescue of their companions. They must have thought she did this, that if they stayed she would do the same to them.

Had she caused this? Was it somehow related to the power of the staff? She had been using it a lot lately. What was she going to do?

She took a few steps to the nearest mound of earth that marked where the first assassin had disappeared. Thrusting her hands forward she dug her fingers into the earth and attempted to pull it free. But it would not budge.

She tried again, and again, eventually thrusting the point of her staff into the dirt to try and wrench a chunk free.

But nothing she did made any difference.

The assassins were somehow gone, swallowed up by the earth itself.

6

She brought Gabriel back to the clearing to take a look at the small mounds, but he couldn't make any more sense of them than she.

Eventually, they were forced to retreat back to their camp before Queen Telma sent someone to investigate.

Once they arrived, she related everything that had happened. She talked about their first meeting with the decoy queen, how Jak had run to meet the real queen in the center of their own camp, and what had happened to the assassins afterward.

"Noralim, the dwarves have an understanding of earth," she said, speaking to the stout council member. "Do you know what might have happened?"

"I can't say I do, young Jak," said Noralim. "Perhaps if I could go see the place where it happened I could tell you something, but we've never heard of the Earth swallowing someone whole like that. Not how you describe."

"Eh good riddance," said Girwirt from beside Noralim. "It just goes to show you that everything is better underground."

Noralim slapped Girwirt on the shoulder, but Seph began to speak so Jak didn't bother to reply to the gnome. "Ultimately, I think this will cause some problems with the verbal agreement you made with the queen. She could see this as an act of aggression, negating her part in the bargain."

Gabriel nodded. "I agree. Though from what I know of the queen, she might have been looking for an excuse to break the agreement anyway."

"You think she may be responsible for the lives of her own men?" Jak asked.

"Mm, I don't think so," Skellig said. "It wouldn't make tactical sense. If she wanted to frame us, she would have used something that more obviously tied their deaths to the Fae. This was something strange and new. And you said yourself that mere moments had passed since you left the queen. She wouldn't have had time to orchestrate something so quickly."

“Yes, I think this is something else,” said Seph. “But we have to be prepared for her to place the blame on us.”

“Which raises the question,” said Cerai from her place in the column of water extending out of the river. “Did we have anything to do with it?”

“Not intentionally,” said Jak, though she had been thinking the same thing.

“Not intentionally, no. But most of the Fae here were changed against their will by a Relic of unknown power. Could the Pillar of Eternity or some other Relic be responsible?”

“But these men weren’t even changed into a Fae. They were simply swallowed up by the ground.” Jak said.

“I think that might be something worth looking into,” said Amelia beside Cerai. She met Jak’s eyes for a moment, with an embarrassed expression on her face, like she didn’t like the idea of blaming Jak, albeit indirectly.

“I agree,” said Gabriel. “We should look into that possibility, as it could affect many of the other humans in the camp. We know of no Relics more powerful than the Pillars of Eternity, and if it behaves like the other Relics that turned humans into Fae, it warrants further study.”

Jak’s gaze dropped to the Relic in her hands. The polished black shaft gleamed in the afternoon light. Hopefully it wasn’t responsible for what happened to those men out there, but if it was, Gabriel was right. They needed to study it. She glanced at Yewin and her mother, both of whom had remained silent thus far. She caught the barest flicker of a nod in the glowing green eyes of her mother.

Slowly, she held it out towards Gabriel. “I think you are all correct. We need to know more before taking further action. If we are responsible for this, then we must own that responsibility.”

Gabriel stepped forward and took the Pillar from her. A wave of loss came unexpected as it left her hand, and suddenly her weariness intensified. She took a small step back to steady herself from a slight wave of dizziness. Then it subsided. After giving herself the Sleeplessness brand, she had thought such feelings were beyond her now. It had only been a day and already she felt like sleeping.

“I think it’s best if I start my examination straight away,” Gabriel said, turning towards the camp.

Jak nodded, and Gabriel turned to leave.

“Lady Oren!” Elva rounded one of the tents at a full sprint and nearly collided with Gabriel on his way out. When she regained a stable footing, and pushed past Gabriel, she held out her arm to Jak. In it was a small scrap of paper. “Forgive my intrusion, but this just came from the enemy camp.”

Dread stabbed at Jak's chest like a cold knife. Reaching one arm forward she accepted the note, unfolded it, and read silently to herself.

Esteemed Jak. In light of recent events regarding some of my men on the field, and many others within my camp, it is clear to me that you do not mean to honor your part of our agreement. I therefore have no choice but to assume your hostile intent and act accordingly. Sincerely yours, Queen Telma.

The note ended with the queen's signature and seal.

Jak took a deep breath and let it out slowly. So that was it. All that talk about peace thrown out the window with the dishwater. She glanced at the rest of the council, and Elva, all of whom were waiting patiently. She read it out loud for all to hear.

"Well, that's not all that surprising," said Seph. "I told you she would look for an excuse to get out of any peace talks. I am surprised that she said anything at all. Why not just attack without warning?"

Skellig asked to take the note from Jak, who complied. The former Watcher examined it closely. "It doesn't necessarily say anything about an attack. It just says she will 'act accordingly.'"

"I made it clear that she cannot win against us. Or against me at least. The power of the Pillar of Eternity alone is enough to grant us victory."

"You plan to defeat their army single handedly?" Skellig raised an eyebrow at her.

Jak thought back to the weariness she felt from using the Pillar of Eternity. "Well, no, but it certainly gives us an advantage."

"Yes, well we must assume that she's planning something, though honestly I'd be more suspicious if she had said outright that they planned to attack. That would likely have been a misdirection, distracting us from her true goal. I'm not sure if this is any better." She turned to Elva. "Can you arrange for any Sightseers in our ranks to watch the enemy camp?"

Elva nodded and said, "at once," before retreating.

"So what do you propose we do?" said Jak once Skellig faced her again. She needed the woman's expertise on this matter. Maybe it was how tired she felt, but her mind was not ready for strategy right now.

"Well regardless, I think it's clear that diplomacy is over, and it failed. Our only hope is to retreat into the mountains or attack. If we stay here, we only give her time to work out a plan."

Jak nodded. "Okay then, I say we prepare to leave. With the gnomes and dwarves to guide us, we might find a suitable home among the mountains, though preferably not inside them," she added with a glance at Girwirt and Noralim. The gnome's face fell in disappointment.

Yewin spoke for the first time. “I will make sure that my people are ready.”

“As will I,” said Karlona, also speaking for the first time.

Jak nodded. It was good to have the Fae on their side. The rest quickly agreed, though Cerai and Amelia still seemed reluctant. The river extended partway into the mountains, but ultimately it would grow more violent and harder to navigate for the Water Fae. And they didn’t know how long before it disappeared completely. But it was still their only choice right now. And they eventually agreed once Jak pointed out that in a worst case scenario, they could probably swim back down the river unseen.

Eventually the council disbanded and they all went to their separate areas to break camp. They had already begun to do so in preparation, but there was still a lot of work to be done before they were ready to leave. And they needed to work fast in case the queen meant to attack them soon.

Skellig followed Jak since their tents were near each other. The major said little as they moved, seemingly lost in thought. Jak didn’t bother her. She was probably planning their strategy moving forward, and Jak left her to her thoughts.

“Lady Oren,” said a voice from one side. Both Jak and Skellig turned to see Elva running towards them again, this time followed by a young Watcher boy that had accompanied Jak and the Fae out of Mt. Harafast. A quick glance at the Watcher’s left hand as he greeted them told Jak that he was a Sightseer. Had he seen something? Was the queen marching on them already?

Skellig was already ahead of Jak. “What have you seen?” she asked the Sightseer.

“Something is happening in the enemy camp, sir,” said the young Watcher, saluting Skellig and Jak.

“An attack?”

“No, sir. Not on us, at least. It’s something else. We’re not quite sure what it is, but it looks like they’re under attack, sir.”

Jak frowned. That didn’t make any sense. Skellig seemed to share her confusion. “Say that again?”

“We didn’t get too close, but from what we can tell there are some large...things tearing through their camp. Their army is in disarray.”

A wave of something like relief rushed through Jak. Maybe the queen wouldn’t attack them after all.

But Skellig, if anything, looked even more concerned. Turning to Elva she said, “Bring me a horse.” Elva did not hesitate, but turned and sprinted back the way she had come, towards the front of the camp. Skellig followed at a slow jog, motioning Jak and the Sightseer to come as well.

“What do you think it is?” said Jak as they moved quickly towards the edge of their camp.

“I don’t know, but if it means trouble for them, it will mean trouble for us,” Skellig said without breaking stride. The woman was so tall that Jak had to push herself a bit to keep up.

When they reached the edge of the camp, Elva was unlatching two of their horses. They only had a handful, and they weren’t cavalry horses, but were used mostly by scouts, which was a good thing, as they were usually fast.

For a moment, Jak paused. Perhaps she should go back and find the Pillar of Eternity. With that, she could arrive at the enemy camp in no time. Then again, she had just agreed to let it go for a time, so they could make sure it was safe. She didn’t want to unwittingly cause any more disruptions. Instead she would have to rely on her brands. Jak followed Skellig, climbing onto the second horse while the Sightseer hoisted himself up behind Skellig.

With a swift kick, Jak guided the horse away from the camp, with Skellig at her side. It only took a minute or two to find the two mounds of earth where the earth had swallowed up the assassins hours before. Nothing appeared to have changed. Moving just beyond the small mounds, Skellig pulled up short. Jak followed suit. They didn’t want to get too close, depending on the situation.

Jak peered in the distance. She didn’t have the eyes of a Sightseer, though she could clearly make out the individual tents from this distance. And she could hear.

Shouts echoed from the enemy camp, shouts and screams, the clink of metal on metal, and a strange bellowing sound of some sort.

She squinted, trying to make out what was causing the commotion. There was a lot of movement, but a few lone shapes stood out to her. They were taller than the rest, darker, and there was something not quite human about them. They looked...lumpy. Jak couldn’t find another way to describe them from this distance. What exactly were they? A demon attack perhaps? If so, those were incredibly large demons.

The strange figures appeared to be the source of the chaos. They swung what must have been enormous arms, and with each swing Jak saw the glint of metal armor in the sunlight as soldiers went flying. Skellig was right, whatever was happening, it probably wasn’t a good thing for them either.

“What the…” Skellig trailed off as she too squinted in that direction. A faint rumbling sound came from behind them, momentarily distracting Jak, though Skellig seemed to take no notice. Jak turned to see what was causing the noise and immediately found its source.

The mounds behind them, the ones that had swallowed up the assassins earlier, were moving. The earth was clumping together, moving supernaturally upward and outward, forming what looked like two structures of some kind. It wasn't just dirt anymore, it was made of hard stone, or what looked like stone at least. And as it moved, Jak could see small flashes of purple light emanate from between the different stones. Like some invisible force holding it all together.

"Skellig?" she said, not taking her eyes off of what was happening. Skellig gasped. She must have turned and seen what Jak was seeing.

The Sightseer also yelped as the rocks continued to pile upward, defying gravity and eventually forming what appeared to be large creatures of some kind, vaguely human in shape. Their dark, earthy forms rose several feet above Jak and Skellig, even while they sat on horseback.

Then one of them began to move.

It turned, and Jak could make out two pinpricks of a bright purple light in the area that must have been its head. The light was strange, unlike the constant green light of the Shadow Fae's eyes, this light danced and flashed erratically. It reminded Jak of the light called by someone with a Thunder brand. The light of a storm.

Those strange eyes fixed on Jak, Skellig, and the Sightseer. For a moment, nobody moved.

Then with speed uncharacteristic of their huge bulk, the two monsters sprang at them. Skellig immediately spurred her horse, which lunged forward and to one side, missing the giant arms of the rocky forms as they lashed out right where the horse had been moments before. The horse whinnied and began galloping away, with Skellig and the Sightseer barely hanging on to the spooked animal.

Jak was not as quick. With a bellow that shook the air around it, the second beast barrelled into Jak's horse. She went flying, tumbling to the ground. She was on her feet in an instant, and it was a good thing too, as the two giant arms of the monster came hurtling down. She leapt backward to avoid it, but her horse was not as fortunate. Still lying on the ground and unable to get up, the rocky arms slammed into it. The horse gave a pained cry and Jak heard the sickening crunch of its bones breaking.

She couldn't mourn for the horse now. Already the beast had noticed her and began stepping over the horse and coming at her. Even with Strength, that thing would swat her like a fly if it got too close. She feinted and dodged to one side, the giant lumbering form carried by its momentum past her.

Then she called up the magic of Flamedancing and sent a wave of fire hurtling at the creature. The fire passed right over it like water over rocks. It had no effect other than to make its head turn towards

her.

Right, so fire was useless against these things. If only she had Telekinesis, perhaps she'd have a chance. Though she wasn't sure if even a Telekinetic could hold something so strong. Maybe several Telekinetics together.

Again it bellowed, like the sound of bricks sliding against each other, but far louder. It came at her, and Jak had no choice but to dodge again. It missed once more, but only just. While beside it, Jak slammed her shoulder into its huge form, calling on every ounce of brand-enhanced strength to push against it. Perhaps if she could knock it over, she'd have enough time to run away.

Pain shot through her shoulder as it met with the immovable force of the rocky creature. The momentum of her Strength-enhanced blow knocked it off balance, but did little else. It still stood on both feet. Slowly this time, it turned to face her, its electric eyes flashing even in broad daylight. This close, Jak could see that a similar light surrounded its rocky body, especially at the joints, where rocky flesh seemed to move and connect unnaturally together, somehow held in place by the strange light.

Yet Jak thought she saw something in those eyes, as strange as they were.

Fear. Primal, instinctive fear.

This creature wasn't attacking out of hatred or for any other motive. It was attacking because it was afraid.

Jak barely had time to register the thought before a stony arm came crashing down to meet her. Just in time, she rolled away, grateful for the training she'd received from Naem during her months with the Watchers and at Skyecliff. She rolled out of the way, and rose just as she saw Skellig come speeding back on her horse.

A spout of fire shot out of Skellig's hands, enveloping the stony creature attacking Jak. In the distance Jak could see the second figure, chasing after Skellig, though unable to run as fast as the horse.

Jak's attacker turned to face the new threat. It bellowed and lunged at Skellig, who immediately turned her horse and ran away, leading both of the creatures away from Jak.

Bless that woman. Jak now had a chance to get away. Turning towards their camp, she ran for all she was worth, counting on Skellig to lead the two monsters away and circle around to the camp.

This must be what was happening in Queen Telma's army. She had mentioned in the note that there were more 'incidents' among her other men. Whatever had happened to those two assassins in the field must have also happened to others in the camp. And now there were probably many of those things causing chaos throughout the enemy establishment.

Once again, a pang of guilt shot through Jak. If the power of the Pillar of Eternity was responsible for all this, then it really was her fault for taking it to Telma's camp and spawning chaos.

Hooves echoed behind her. Skellig must have circled back around already.

"Get on!" Skellig called to her, and Jak did not have to be told twice. Three people on one horse was almost too much, and she nearly fell off the back of the horse several times as they cleared the rest of the distance to their camp. But Skellig did not slow, and Jak did not blame her. A few times she tried to look back and see if those creatures were following them. They may have been, but Jak could not see either way.

"Mobilize!" Skellig shouted as their horse hurtled into camp. "Weapons ready. Fae and combat brands at the front."

Soldiers began scrambling, knowing that when their chief commander dramatically entered camp like this, it was time to move and obey, asking questions later.

Jak pushed herself off the horse's rear, landing softly on the ground. Skellig continued circling round the camp, shouting orders as she went.

Instead, Jak ran to her tent, finding her own set of armor and her father's spear lying inside. With as much speed as she could muster, she threw on the leather and strapped it down. She had a set of heavier armor, but she wasn't sure it would do any good against creatures like these. Speed would be more important.

She wasn't sure if the monsters were coming their way, but Skellig was right to have everyone on their guard. If they were coming, they would likely need everyone to take them down.

Dressed and spear in hand, Jak ran back to the front, where all of the Fae, Watchers, and other humans were already falling into ranks. Most of the humans without combat brands stood in the back, holding bows instead.

Jak pushed past them, pushing her way to the front, eventually finding herself among the Shadow Fae, the most numerous of the Fae in their camp, and the most combat ready.

Finally, she faced the fields that separated their army from that of Queen Telma. Sure enough, two lumbering figures could be seen in the distance, heading right for them.

7

"Telekinetics at the ready!" Skellig shouted as the two lumbering figures grew closer. Jak saw a small handful of men, most of whom had previously been Watchers, step forward. They didn't have many Telekinetics. But Skellig was right to call on them. They had the best chance of taking down these...whatever they were. At least they could hold them down while the rest of them figured out how to take one out.

Should they even be trying to kill these things? Jak thought back to the fear she had seen in its eyes. Was it just defending itself? Though if that were true, why had it continued to follow Skellig and herself back to their camp. Why not just run off?

If they were doing the wrong thing by killing them, Jak could only hope that they scared them off first. But right now, she couldn't think about that. Right now they were under attack by a strange creature, and self-preservation had to take priority. Even she could understand that. She supposed, in a way, the queen was right. If a strange creature threatened you, defending yourself was a logical course of action. But of course, this was different. The queen was striking out of a perceived fear, not out of provocation.

Or at least, she had. What would the queen think now that more of these creatures were tearing through her ranks?

"Archers!" Skellig called as the enormous monsters grew closer. The archers nocked arrows and raised their bows high. Would arrows do anything to the monsters?

"Loose!" said Skellig. The archers obeyed and the arrow shafts flew through the air. Many missed, but several pinged off the rocky skin of the approaching beasts. No good. They would have to find another tactic.

Skellig seemed to be expecting this, as she waved the Telekinetics forward. Putting forth their hands, they waited for the creatures to come into range. Running ahead as if they hadn't noticed the arrows at all, the twin giants quickened their pace. When they were about a hundred yards outside of their army, Skellig shouted, "Now!"

Light shone out of the left hand of each Telekinetic as they activated their brands. The two beasts stopped in their tracks, held in place by an invisible force, the power of a Telekinetic. Jak smiled. This was good. Perhaps they had a chance.

One of the creatures took a single step forward.

Jak's smile faded, and she glanced at the Telekinetics to see sweat beading down their faces, which were red with effort. They had at least six Telekinetics, surely three for each of these giants was enough to stop them, right?

But apparently they only just managed to hold them back. And it was not getting any easier. The monsters took another step forward, and then another.

"Strongarms!" Skellig roared. "See if you can tear them apart why they're still immobile." Several other Watchers rushed to do as commanded. Jak hesitated. Technically she was a Strongarm as well. Should she help? She took a step forward.

Skellig's arm shot out to stop her. "Not you," she said in a quiet tone. "You're too valuable to risk right now."

Jak wanted to say that everyone was too valuable to lose, but she also knew to trust Skellig, so she stayed in place. But Skellig was once again turning her attention to the battle.

"Does anyone have Thunder?" she asked, scanning the crowd of soldiers.

Thunder? What good would that do? It wasn't as powerful as Flamedancing, and Jak had already proven that the flames did absolutely nothing against these enemies. Why would Skellig…

A hand shot up. "I am, sir!" said a young man, the one Jak had seen before.

"Come." Skellig waved him over. "We may have need of you."

The young man stepped forward, but Jak's attention suddenly shifted as one of the Telekinetics cried out and swayed on the spot. His face was completely red from the strain.

His hold must have broken because one of the giants began moving faster in their direction. More shouts came from the others, and their holds must have broken without the help of their comrade, because the beast darted forward even quicker now.

Just as the Strongarms arrived.

A massive, stony arm swung at the approaching warriors. With the crunch of bones that Jak could hear from where she stood, the beast swatted the Strongarms aside. Screams reached the rest of them as they flew across the field, some landing back among their ranks, having flown nearly a hundred yards through the air.

Jak watched, horrified, as the bloodied mess of a Strongarm landed nearby and did not get up. Yet, even as the first monster spread

carnage, several Strongarms dodged out of the way and laid hold on the second beast, which was still held mostly in place by the remaining Telekinetics. With a surge, they collectively heaved at the beast's arm and with a sound like rocks falling down a mountain, it tore loose.

The beast bellowed louder than ever before, and Jak couldn't help but wince. These creatures could feel pain. The Telekinetics cried out as they lost their hold on the second beast as well. Its remaining arm swung and sent more of the Strongarms flying.

Skellig cursed. "Bright Fae, see if you can hold them off," she yelled and turned to face the young man with the Thunder brand.

Yewin stepped forward, accompanied by about a half-dozen of the Bright Fae. There weren't many of them left, but they were still powerful. "Shield your eyes!" Yewin shouted. Jak obeyed without question, as did the others.

Even with her eyes closed, the flash of light that emanated from the Bright Fae was enough to leave an afterimage. Two rocky shouts came from the direction of the creatures. Jak opened her eyes to see them clutching at their heads. Good, so those strange eyes of theirs still worked the same as the rest of them.

Skellig had a hand on the young man's back, the one with Thunder, encouraging him to take a few steps in front of her. He swallowed as he moved in front of the main line, passing the Telekinetics that were still straining with the effort of holding the creatures back, as well as the remaining Strongarms that had run back to the main group. What did Skellig have in mind?

The Thunderdancer raised one arm and Jak felt her hair rise as a crackling energy surged through the young man.

Recovering from the flash of bright light, the two creatures howled and ran forward once more. This time it looked like the work of the Telekinetics had almost no effect. Towering above everyone, the monsters came.

A bolt of lightning flashed out of the Thunderdancer's finger, hanging in the air only for an instant and leaving a sharp afterglow in Jak's eyes.

The bolt hit the lead monster directly in the chest, and to Jak's surprise, it stopped in its tracks.

For a second, Jak thought it had turned to stone once more. But no, it was still moving. Jak squinted to see more. It was trembling, every part of its body quivering like it was having some kind of seizure.

Another bolt came out of the young man's finger and hit the second beast. It too stopped in its tracks.

"Keep it up!" Skellig encouraged the Thunderdancer.

A burning smell stung Jak's nostrils as bolt after bold erupted from the young man's fingers. The sky was completely clear, not a storm in sight, so the man's powers were not very strong.

Regardless, what he was able to summon appeared to be enough. As more bolts struck the two creatures, their limbs began to shake wildly and both fell to their knees. Jak took a hopeful step forward. Was this actually going to work? The rest of the army stared in amazement as the Thunderdancer single-handedly held off the two beasts.

But it was not that easy. From what Jak knew, Thunder could take its toll. A glance at the young man confirmed this. Sweat streamed down his face, and he began leaning on Skellig for support. Hopefully it would be enough.

One of the creatures collapsed to the ground, completely still but for occasional jolt as another bolt of lightning touched it. The other with the stump of an arm wasn't faring any better. It was also on its knees, holding itself up by its one good arm.

The bolts of lightning coming out of the Thunderdancer's hands flickered and died as the young man collapsed. Skellig caught him and did her best to hold him up, because he could not do so on his own. Jak took a deep breath, looking back at the giant that still moved. The other one might be dead, but this one wasn't. Slowly, it pushed itself up on its good arm. And there was nothing more the Thunderdancer could do about it.

8

"Is there anyone else with Thunder?" Jak called out to the other soldiers. No one answered. It appeared they only had the one, or at least only one within earshot.

A few of the men, women, and Fae took a collective step back, not looking at Jak. She followed their gaze to see that the creature was once again on its feet. But this time it did not rush forward as before. Those strange eyes considered them, as if looking at them with new understanding.

Slowly, almost reluctantly, it turned and began to run away to the east, away from both armies. Its heavy footfalls reverberated through the ground, growing fainter and fainter until they disappeared entirely. Jak ran forward, past the edge of their army, to see where it had gone. She could still make it out in the distance, turning slightly to the south towards the mountains once it was far away from their camp, seeking protection in the rocky outcroppings that appeared so much like its own body.

Satisfied that it showed no signs of returning any time soon, Jak returned at a slow jog back to Skellig. She was selecting several of the Fae to help with the cleanup of dead and wounded. The Strongarms were the only ones seriously hurt, though the Telekinetics and Thunderdancer did not look much better. They would need some rest. Perhaps they could do with a Sleeplessness brand? She would have to reconsider how freely she gave out those brands. If it could help anyone avoid situations like these, perhaps it would be worth the risk. But she didn't have time to worry about that yet.

"Everyone else stay ready," Jak called out as she returned to the front lines. "There are more of those things in the queen's camp. We can't guarantee that they won't come here at some point."

Skellig nodded, "Sightseers, I want every one of you watching the enemy camp like hawks. If anything changes you must let me know immediately. I will be at the council clearing with the Lady Jak, discussing our next moves."

Jak hadn't thought about calling the council for yet another

meeting, the second in one day, but Skellig was right. If anything, they had even more to discuss now. For starters, trying to figure out what these creatures really were.

"Have that thing brought to the clearing. I'm sure Gabriel and Yewin will want to examine it." Skellig pointed at the body of the creature that had collapsed. Jak hoped it was dead. It certainly looked like that was the case. It lay immovable, and parts of it were even smoking from the barrage of lightning.

With that, Skellig met Jak's eyes and nodded with her head in the direction of the council clearing. Jak agreed and began walking in that direction, following Skellig's lead.

"How did you know to use a Thunderdancer?" said Jak as they walked.

"It was just a hunch. You noticed the light of its eyes and in its joints?"

Jak nodded. She had noticed that light, something that seemed to hold the rock together as a body somehow. Now that she was thinking of it, she realized the connection that Skellig had made. "You thought it was the same as lightning?"

"Lightning is an interesting substance," said Skellig. "We still know very little about it. But we know it has conductive properties of some sort. I thought if it was somehow powering their bodies, perhaps more of the stuff might overwhelm them."

Jak thought that through. She hadn't even thought of lightning being connected to the strange monsters. But she supposed it made sense. And Skellig did know a lot more about combat brands than she did, having been a leader in the Watcher army.

Once they reached the council clearing next to the river, they found Amelia, Cerai, and all of the other Water Fae perched on the edge of the river. When they saw Skellig and Jak, Amelia rose on a column of water and moved closer. "What happened? Are you okay? Well you look okay, that's good. We heard shouting and then the sound of a battle, but not with a big army. Fill us in please?"

Several of the other council members had gathered by that time. Yewin and Gabriel, as well as Karlona and Seph. Jak didn't see Girwirt and Noralim yet, but that was probably because the gnomes and dwarves had not been at the forefront of the battle, so they probably didn't know they were needed yet.

"Remember what I said about the earth swallowing those assassins whole?" Jak explained to Amelia. "Well there were these giant—" Jak didn't know how to explain it. "—creatures that somehow rose out of the mounds that were left, and attacked us. From what we can tell the same thing was happening at the queen's camp."

Amelia blinked at her. "Say all of that again?"

“I know, I had trouble believing it too. But I saw it happen. Don’t ask me how.”

“Yet I’m afraid that is exactly the question we should be asking ourselves,” said Gabriel. “Where did these beasts come from, and what can we do to stop them.”

“We only appear to have one Thunderdancer in the entire group,” said Skellig. “And he’s already exhausted from dealing with just two of them. We can’t rely on that tactic to take out the rest.”

“Thunderdancer?” Amelia asked, confused.

“It was the only way to stop them,” Jak said in a hurry. “I’ll explain later.

“Well I, for one, think the answer is obvious,” said Seph. All heads turned to look at him.

Seph considered them all as if they were missing something right in front of their faces. “They’re Fae. Just like the others.”

Jak and Gabriel frowned, but Skellig let out a small laugh. “So far the Fae have retained the mental capacity of humans. They still have that humanity inside them. These creatures were nothing more than animals or demons.”

Jak wasn’t so sure, now that she was thinking about it. Demons and animals acted out of instinct. She had seen some form of intelligence in the eyes of these creatures, even if their actions had been hostile.

Seph was pulling out a book, his personal copy of the Book of Illadar. Jak would have to find out more about where he got that book one of these days.

“The book speaks of twelve races, including humans,” he said, flipping through the pages to find what he was looking for. “We’ve already seen five of these emerge. We still have six more to go.” Finally he found what he was looking for and began to read. “And another race shall rise from the dust, formed of what gives life to all. They shall trample their enemies and give life to Illadar.”

“Well they certainly came from the dust.” said Gabriel. “And they seem to be doing a good job of trampling their enemies. But does the book say anything about us being the enemy? So far we’ve operated under the assumption that the Fae would work together.”

Seph didn’t seem to have an answer for that. “All I know is that the passage fits, and if it’s true that the Pillar of Eternity is what caused them to change, then they fit the pattern as well, changing thanks to their proximity to a Relic’s power.”

“Well, perhaps, but we have to assume they are hostile for the moment,” said Skellig.

“I advise caution,” said Seph. “If this passage in the book is correct, than they may have a pivotal role to play in the formation of Illadar.

That can't be said of all the races cited in this book. Some are there for its birth, but others come after."

That was news to Jak, who admittedly hadn't studied the book like she should have. She really would have to read it through in its entirety soon. The next break she got, she promised herself, she would start at the beginning and read it cover to cover. She trusted that Seph and the book were not frauds like many others in Skyecliff had believed. Too much had come true for it to be fabricated. Though even Seph admitted he did not know exactly what Illadar was, other than a place of peace for Fae and humans alike.

Just then, a group of the remaining Strongarms brought the corpse of the large beast into the clearing. Amelia let out a soft 'oh' and her column of water retreated a few feet back towards the river. The large creature still looked like it was made of rock, especially now that the dancing light in its eyes had faded. If Jak hadn't known better, she would have thought it was nothing more than a pile of stones.

Gabriel and Yewin predictably wandered next to the dead beast and began poking around. Skellig merely spared a glance before speaking again. "We must talk solutions. Let's assume that more of these things are coming, and that our one Thunderdancer will not be cable of handling more than one. We've learned that fire is useless, we don't have enough Telekinetics, and while Strongarms could be effective, it's too risky to get that close and expect results without casualties. What are some other ways we can deal with them?"

"We could use the river to...I don't know, drown them somehow?" said Cerai.

Skellig nodded. "A possibility, though we don't yet know if they respond to water like the rest of us. Assuming they breathe, I'd guess that suffocation is the only way water will be effective."

"My warriors could cloud their vision, possibly lead them away in confusion." said Karlona, her arms crossed.

Again, Skellig nodded. "Another good possibility, and it would serve in the short run, but it's also not sustainable. We can't guarantee that once led away they won't come back. We have to find a way to eliminate them."

"Listen to yourselves!" Jak said, aghast. All eyes turned to face her. Jak couldn't believe what she was hearing, and mere hours after the queen had said very much the same things about Jak and the Fae.

Realizing that everyone expected her to speak further, she swallowed and opened her mouth. "The queen marched here specifically because she saw us as a threat, one that had to be eliminated before it threatened her."

Skellig shook her head, "it's not the same thing, Jak."

"Isn't it? We're talking about killing these things that we know

almost nothing about. Sure, our priorities should be our own preservation, but these are Fae we're talking about. They should be treated as such."

"That would be a naive approach," Skellig said, her stance firm. "We don't know for sure that they are Fae, or that they have any intelligence in them whatsoever. From what I observed, they're far more like demons. We wouldn't accept demons as Fae, would we?"

"The queen said much the same thing about all of us. Or at least the Fae. I just think we need to know more about them first. Try to find a way to reason with them."

"If you want to reason with them, by all means be my guest, but do it away from the camp because if any of them gets within two-hundred yards of our perimeter, we will do everything in our power to drive it off or eliminate it." Jak squared her shoulders, feeling several retorts come to her mind. Queen Telma had called her naive too, and she wasn't growing fond of the phrase. The others were staring from one to the other of them, feeling the tensions rise. No one said a word for several seconds.

Suddenly a messenger, one of the Sightseers stepped into the clearing. He paused, examining the situation and probably sensing the tension hanging in the air.

"What is it?" Skellig said, turning away from Jak to face the man.

"Whatever happened at the queen's army, it appears to be over, and they're breaking camp," he said.

"They're leaving?" asked Karlona, looking somewhat relieved to have something else to talk about.

"Yes ma'am, we think they may have killed some of the...uh," he stared down at the rocky corpse at their feet. "Whatever these things are. But we clearly saw more of them fleeing to the west, over the river. They may have circled south, though we're not sure."

So there were more of them out there. At least they were safe for the moment. The last thing Jak wanted was for those creatures to attack them again and confirm Skellig's theories that these new Fae were hostile before Jak had a chance to prove otherwise.

"And you said the queen is retreating?" Skellig asked. Jak perked up, yes this was important information. Could their troubles be solved somehow through all this? She could hope, but she seriously doubted it.

"Yes, though they've just begun."

Skellig ran a hand through her short hair in thought. "Probably not going far."

"What makes you say that?" said Seph.

"Well, even if they were going all the way back to Skyecliff, an army of that size will need supplies to get there. They're probably

heading north to the main road between Tradehall and Skyecliff. Plenty of provisions travel along that path. But retreating all the way to Skyecliff now would mean taking a loss, however minor, with nothing to show for it. It wouldn't be great for moral, not to mention the public perception of the queen's competence."

Yewin spoke up, "And without the peace treaty that Jak nearly arranged with the queen, the only way she can turn their journey into a profitable excursion…"

Skellig finished the thought. "Would be to eliminate us as a threat, or possibly this new group of Fae if you want to call them that. Doing that much would at least give her something to boast about, though I doubt too many people would be satisfied with it. They've been attacked, and even if it wasn't us, many will be out for our blood."

Jak's mind darkened. Everything Skellig said made sense, and that was the problem. Why couldn't people be...she searched for a word. Nice? It wasn't that hard to do. At the very least if everyone just minded their own business then no one would care about the Fae or anyone else.

"So then what are our next moves?" said Karlona. "Do we take the Fae into the mountains like we planned, or…"

"I told you, we don't like being called Fae," said a voice off to one side. A quick glance showed Girwirt marching into the clearing, followed by Noralim. The gnome had his arms crossed in indignation. "And how come we weren't informed of this meeting."

"I'm sorry, we had to meet in a hurry. We sent a messenger but didn't have time to wait for your arrival," said Skellig. "You're welcome here, of course."

"Seriously though, the next person that calls us Fae, I will climb onto their head and rip their hairs out one by one," said Girwirt.

"We weren't talking about you, specifically," said Jak, putting her hands on her hips and staring down at the gnome.

"It's all the same. We're all so different anyway. Using the same name will get confusing the more of these things start popping out of the ground." He waved a hand at the giant rocky mass in front of him.

"So you agree that this is—" Jak stopped herself from saying Fae. "—one of the races?"

"What else could it be?" said Girwirt. "They're obviously not those demon thingys. They're more like trolls. That's a name we have for even bigger giants, usually the stupid ones. Sometimes we use it for you."

"As important as it is to find a better classification for some of us," said Yewin, cutting off Jak's retort. "I think we should get back to the matter at hand, determining what our next move is."

"We would like to stay here," said Cerai, and Amelia nodded

beside her. “Going into the mountains was never an option that suited us well, and now with those...trolls possibly heading into the mountains, we don’t know if we’d be safe from them if we travelled that direction.”

Skellig’s armor clinked as she crossed her arms. “I don’t like the idea of staying put.”

“Forgive me, Skellig,” said Gabriel. “I know you’re the tactician here, but I think what the Water Fae suggest is best. We can still maintain readiness to leave at a moment’s notice, but there are new unknowns that will face us if we do leave. We lose little by staying here. It might give us an opportunity to stockpile more food. Especially if Jak continues to hand out Hungerless brands to those who can use it.”

Skellig looked to Jak for the first time since their minor argument, measuring her. Jak held her gaze.

“Very well,” Skellig said finally. “Our first priority, therefore, will be readying to leave if needed, and gathering food that we can store.”

“And finding new names for all the races!” said Girwirt enthusiastically. Noralim, who had remained silent this whole time smiled and met each of the council member’s eyes, clearly liking Girwirt’s idea.

“Perhaps not at the top of the priority list,” Skellig said carefully. “But you may all consider what you will.” With that, she stormed off in the direction of her own tent, looking unhappy with the situation. Jak did not follow.

9

With Skellig gone, most of the others decided it was a good time to disperse. Jak, however, stayed put. She wandered over to Amelia. It seemed like such a long time ago when they were both students at the College of Skycliff. In actuality, it was only a few months earlier. It had been an eventful time for both of them.

"How are you holding up?" asked Amelia. Cerai, who had been hovering next to Amelia, glanced at the two of them then retreated, leaving the two to talk.

"That obvious?" Jak said, eyebrow raised.

"You look like a cat about to pounce. Wait no, bad analogy, too aggressive. A bullwhip about to snap. No, too vague. Maybe a…"

As was often the case when spending time with Amelia, Jak couldn't help but smile. "I get it," she said. "I'm too much of an open book."

"Well that does fit everything else about you," said Amelia. "Mind if I relax?" She pointed down at the column of water extending from the river that held her in place. Perhaps holding that thing for long enough wore the Water Fae out as much as the continued use of magic did for Jak.

"Not at all," said Jak. Amelia let her Fae magic guide her column of water back towards the river. Jak followed until they were right on the bank. Amelia lay down on the edge, her back tail swishing playfully in the water, her arms and front half on land.

Jak took off her shoes and sat down next to Amelia, letting her toes dip into the flowing river. "It's like, sometimes I don't know if everyone thinks I'm a child or a savior. Sometimes it feels like both."

"So relatable. Every teenager goes through that," Amelia said, winking.

Jak chuckled. "Just like every teenager gets a giant tail fin."

As if on cue, Amelia's tail swung through the water and splashed Jak full in the face. "Hey!" Jak said, opening her mouth in shock as the cold water drenched her top. "Not funny! Remember I can control fire. I'll turn you into steam."

“You’d have to catch me first,” said Amelia, making a splash behind her again. She had a point, those tails were powerful. It could probably propel Amelia at incredible speeds. Though the river was narrower where they were, restricting what the Water Fae could do. And out of the water they were all but helpless.

Jak lost her smile as she thought of the other Water Fae, some of which would still be trapped in Skyecliff. The queen’s palace had been locked up tight before they left. Not even the Water Fae were able to use their magic to get in and rescue their companions. What had the queen done with them? She had promised to release all of them, but that was before the attack by those trolls.

“Are you sure you don’t regret becoming a Water Fae?”

“What I regret most is that awkward name,” said Amelia, still in a good mood. “Girwirt is right, we need something new. No, I don’t regret it.”

“Not even a little?” Jak probed.

“Perhaps at first, when I was still in the palace and had no way of getting around. The Royal Priest took samples of my blood and kept me out of the water for days. I thought I was going to shrivel up like a raisin. There were definitely times when I thought of this—” she waved her tailfin once more, “—as a curse.”

“But not anymore?”

“Once I was united with the ocean, I can’t really describe the feeling to you, Jak. It was something beyond anything I experienced as a human. I was suddenly aware of the ocean, and all the water which connected to it, which is most water by the way. All the major rivers and seas, I had a connection to all of it. Do you have any idea how big that is?”

Jak nodded slightly. “Actually, I think I might. It sounds very similar to how I felt when I linked with Yewin and the gnomes and dwarves. Though water isn’t really their thing.”

“You know, we never did try that link thing. I’ll bet we could puzzle it out.”

Jak immediately shook her head. “Don’t. Every time I’ve tried, it nearly kills the participating Fae. It only worked in the mountain because there were a lot of Fae present. And if I’d kept it up much longer I would have used up all of their…I don’t know…energy I guess.”

“There’s got to be something to that, though. It seems too important to be a random thing that kills Fae. There’s got to be some reason for the link to exist. Maybe we’re missing something.”

Jak shrugged. “For now, we don’t use it except in the most important of emergencies. And then only with the help of a lot of Fae, so we don’t kill anyone else.”

“Well, in any event, I can say for sure that once I reached the ocean, everything felt right.”

“What exactly does that mean?”

“I don’t know, it’s like I was always meant to be a Fae, and I didn’t even know it. Like I was born in the wrong body, and the change made me into what I was supposed to be all along.”

“Hm,” Jak said. “I wonder if everyone sees it that way. Mother has told me something similar before.”

“I mean, statistically I’m sure there are some who don’t. And I really had to be in the right environment before I made that discovery. Anyone still trapped in the palace might still resent the change.”

“I guess that’s just another reason why we need to establish peace with the queen at any cost,” said Jak looking out at the river.

“I thought she broke the treaty.” Amelia cocked her head.

“Well, I can’t see any other option.”

“What if we can’t find peace?”

Jak turned her head back to face her friend. She held her gaze. “I honestly don’t know.”

“It’s a question we should probably be asking ourselves. If the queen won’t give up the Fae, or leave us alone, what are we going to do about it? We can’t keep running forever, and those Fae will need our help eventually.”

Jak ran a hand through her raven hair. “I had hoped it would never come to that. I just had a long conversation with the queen assuring her that we would not attack her. That we just wanted to be left alone.”

“Do you think that’s really a realistic option?”

“I want it to be.”

“But if it isn’t, are you willing to be the one that goes on the offensive?”

Jak studied her friend. The strawberry blonde had changed a lot since Jak had first met her. Becoming a Fae and being held by the queen had changed her. “I can’t be certain that I would,” she said eventually. “I’ve committed violence before when I had to, and I would fight a person like Cain if he showed his face again. But the queen and her armies are every bit my people as you are.”

“I suppose I can understand that,” said Amelia, resting her face on her hands on the sandy bank. “But we don’t live under normal circumstances anymore.”

“You have never said a truer word.”

They sat in silence for a time before Amelia asked one more question. “Do you ever wonder why the Fae are here?”

“What, like why you transformed?”

“I mean, why have we transformed now? These powerful Relics

have been around for a long time. People must have come in contact with them before, so why are we only seeing and hearing about Fae over the last few years?"

"Well the gnomes and dwarves claimed they've been around for generations."

"Yeah, but you know what I mean. Even if they did change a long time ago, we're only learning about it now. It's like everything is happening at once."

Jak nodded. "Yeah, I see what you're saying. And when you add prophecy to the mix…"

"Right! It's clearly not just happenstance."

"You're wondering why prophecy is fulfilling itself now?"

"Yeah," Amelia's fin swirled around lazily in the water. "'Why' is a good word for it. Because it's clear that something is happening. We've transformed now for a reason, and your boyfriend says it's because of this Illadar thing, whatever that is."

"My…what?" For a moment, Jak forgot what they were talking about. "You mean Seph?"

"Oh please, it's obvious you're into him. And after what happened with your last choice of guys, I think you could probably use a fresh start."

"Um…" Jak started. How was she supposed to respond to that?

But just then, they heard a light rustling in the grass behind them. Jak turned, grateful for the distraction, to see Vander approaching them. The Shadow Fae looked relieved to see her.

"Hello Jak."

"Vander," Jak greated him in return. She always liked that Vander never used her titles, just her name. "Aren't you supposed to be patrolling the perimeter?" That had been Vander's primary job since arriving.

"I just came from there. But a large group of humans has just arrived and I thought you'd like to hear the news from me first."

Jak stood, catching Amelia's curious look as she did so, her tail still making soft splashing sounds behind her.

"What is it?"

"It's Naem. He's back."

The splashing sounds stopped abruptly.

10

"Who are all these people?" Skellig barked at the mild confusion as a large group of travelers voiced their discomfort at being surrounded by Shadow Fae. They were being held just outside of their camp, and Skellig had arrived almost exactly at the same time as Jak.

Jak barely heard Skellig. Her eyes were fixed on the man at the front of the group. His blonde hair was longer and dirtier, and he'd grown a beard, but it was clearly the same young man she'd spent a lot of time with earlier.

Naem stepped forward to meet Skellig. "I can vouch for all of them. They're here to join your band." His eyes met Jak's as she stood behind Skellig. Was that a hint of excitement on his face? To see her?

Jak broke the eye contact to survey the group. If Naem was in charge, she wasn't sure she would trust anyone he brought. His betrayal in Skyecliff had nearly led to her death, and the death of Seph and his followers, not to mention Amelia and Gabriel. If Jak's mother hadn't come to free her, or she had arrived at the execution a moment too late, they all would have perished because of this man in front of her.

Still, she couldn't see anything suspicious about the group. There were maybe fifty of them, with a few large wagons to carry their belongings. A lot of wagons actually. What were they doing with so much stuff? Surely Skellig would order a full search.

"We barely have enough to feed ourselves," said Skellig. "And we're a little short on trust right at the moment. A lot has happened in the last day alone."

"We saw some of it from a distance," said Naem. "We only felt safe to come closer because the queen's army retreated, leaving the main road clear."

"So you know I'll need a good reason why we should take on more mouths to feed."

One of the women standing near Naem spoke up in a dry voice. "We don't mean to be a burden. We can forage for food, cook, clean, anything you need from us. But we have nowhere else to go."

“Anyone can do those things, and we already have plenty,” said Skellig. “You’ll have to give me another reason.”

Jak glanced at Skellig, wondering if the major was being a bit too harsh. Sure, Jak didn’t trust these people, and they were short on supplies, but she also didn’t like the idea of turning people away outright. Then again, if they weren’t assets they would become liabilities, and they did not need more of those right now.

“These people do need help,” said Naem. “And I can explain that later. But there’s another reason why we’re here that I think you’ll want to see.”

He took a few steps backward and turned, walking to the nearest wagon. It must have been heavy, since its wheels sank deep into the grassy earth, though a large sheet kept Jak from seeing what it contained.

Momentarily forgetting herself, she took a curious step forward, as did Skellig, though the latter was on her guard.

In one smooth motion, Naem flung the cover off of the wagon, revealing its contents beneath.

Jak put a hand to her mouth to stifle her gasp. The inside of the wagon was covered in pitch so it could hold a mobile pool of water. And in the water lay two Water Fae.

“You got them out!” she said, looking at Naem with new eyes.

“As many as we could,” said Naem. “There are still more, and the Royal Priest has been tightening security. But we’ve brought a dozen of them.”

A dozen. That was almost as many as they had here near Riverbrook. Naem was right, this did change things.

“Naem and several others risked their lives to get us out of the palace,” said one of the two Fae. “We would be dead or worse without him.”

Jak faced Skellig, trying to communicate with the major with her eyes. Skellig seemed to get the idea.

“Vander,” she said. “See to it that the Water Fae are brought to the river and allowed to join the others. Only the Water Fae mind you. The rest I want to question further.” She turned to one of the former Watchers who had followed her. “Go into the camp and bring Gabriel here.”

The man saluted and ran to do as instructed.

“Why do you need Gabriel?” Jak asked.

“Because I trust his judgement of character. And because he knows Skyecliff and its people better than anyone else on the council.” She turned back to Naem and the others. “I suggest we sit. You’ve got some explaining to do.”

“SOON AFTER YOU LEFT, things only got worse in Skyecliff.” Naem explained a short while later. Gabriel had arrived and several chairs and stumps had been brought to sit on, though most of the newcomers sat on the ground or on the few wagons that were actually used for provisions and not for carrying Water Fae. The others had been taken to the river immediately.

“General Wilva was removed as the general of the Watchers following her transformation into a Water Fae.”

That caused a stir among the listeners. Jak let out a soft, ‘oh’ and Skellig’s eyes widened in shock. But she didn’t interrupt Naem, so he continued. “The Watchers were placed under the direct order of the queen, and we were assigned...unpleasant duties, like punishing civilians for rebellion, even when there was no evidence to convict them.”

Jak barely stopped herself from saying, ‘well what did you think would happen?’ but allowed him to continue. Statements like that would be childish, and she had to be above such things. Besides, Skellig wasn’t saying anything. She just listened intently.

“A few of the other Watchers and myself helped where we could, sparing punishment and getting a select few out of the city when their lives were in danger.”

“Why were they in danger?” Skellig asked. “Was there talk of treason, plots against the queen?”

“No, not actually,” said Naem, leaning forward as if he were getting to the good part. “The queen was rounding people up and taking them into the palace. Some were released shortly thereafter, but many were never heard from again. Some—” he waved a hand in the direction of the river, “—I rescued and brought with me.”

“The queen turned them into Water Fae?” said Jak, speaking for the first time. Naem met her eyes again, and she resisted the urge to look away.

“We don’t know for sure, but we think they were experimenting, determining if there are any inherent indicators that a person will turn into a Fae. Some of those that came out again reported that the Royal Priest took a sample of their blood and did some kind of alchemical work with it. When there appeared to be no issues, they were told that they were among the untainted. I think we can assume that those who didn’t come back were not among the untainted.”

This was troubling news. Could the queen or her priest have discovered a way to tell if a human would turn into a Fae? If so, what would that mean for all the innocent people that hadn’t even turned yet?

Skellig must have been thinking along the same lines, for she waved a hand at the people behind Naem and said, “Can we assume that these are some of those unfortunates?”

A chorus of nods escaped the crowd. “Most of them, yes,” said Naem. “Though some who came with me are my fellow Watchers who decided to defect. We have others still in Skyecliff, risking their lives to smuggle as many people out as possible. Even with the queen leaving the city, she left the Royal Priest in charge, and he’s worse than she is.”

Jak scowled. Naem was right on that count. The queen, at least, seemed to follow a moral code, even if that code was a bit skewed. The Royal Priest was something else entirely. Now if only Naem had realized that before, perhaps he wouldn’t have betrayed her to the man.

Naem continued, “He recently announced that everyone is required to present themselves for counting and indexing. I believe the queen was planning on doing the same throughout some of the other large cities once she’s done here. The claim is that they merely wish to know more of their subjects and how to best serve them. But they’re also asking for a small sample of blood. Their excuse is that they need it to prevent the spread of disease.”

Skellig’s eyes darkened. “They’re weeding out everyone who could become a Fae.”

Naem nodded. “Exactly. And once they have that information, we’re not sure what they’ll do. I would expect to see a lot of people simply disappearing in the night.”

Skellig rose to her feet, with a slight growl. Jak could understand the woman’s frustration. Here they were just trying to mind their own business and convince the queen to do so, when potentially thousands would be convicted of crimes they did not commit, just because of who they were, or who they could become.

“We’re going to have to do something about this,” Jak said softly. She didn’t like it. It was exactly what the queen had predicted. They were going to have to stop this from happening, and the only way to do it was to depose the queen. Why did the queen have to be right about this? Why couldn’t she just leave them all alone, and peacefully allow the Fae or anyone who wanted to join them to do so?

But as soon as her doubts surfaced, she squashed them flat. No, the queen had brought this on herself. Someone with this level of hatred and fear did not deserve to be on the throne.

She felt a small measure of hesitation at that thought. In the blink of an eye she had gone from wanting to be left alone, to thoughts about deposing a monarch. Had the queen been right to fear her and the Fae so? But of course, the queen could have maintained

everything she had lost and feared to lose if she had only treated the Fae with fairness and mercy. Her own actions had condemned her, not Jak, and not the Fae.

Naem was looking from Jak to Skellig, measuring their reactions. “We thought you might want to help.”

“We can’t be everywhere,” said Skellig, who had begun pacing, still visibly frustrated. “We’ve already lost so many of the Fae to the queen. We’re not invincible.”

“You seem to have dealt with the queen’s army fairly well,” Naem offered.

“That wasn’t us,” Skellig waved a hand in dismissal. “Those were apparently some new species of Fae.” She said it like she still didn’t believe it.

Naem raised an eyebrow, and there were excited looks from those around them. “So there have been more.”

“Even more than you realize,” said Jak. “I found two other types of Fae in Mt. Harafast.”

“We heard about that,” Naem said, excitement building. “After the queen learned that you were there, she marched with her army on Riverbrook. Perhaps she thought she’d have a better chance at defeating them without their leader. I...I’m glad you made it out okay,” he said that last part with a soft warmth to his voice. Jak looked away, turning instead to Skellig.

“What Naem says changes everything,” she said. “We can’t exactly lie around and do nothing while the queen weeds out potential Fae from the entire population.”

“If the queen chooses to take drastic action on those who have committed no crime, it won’t be long before the people rise up against her. Or perhaps they will join us.” Skellig massaged her temples.

“But how many will die before it comes to that? And all the queen would have to do is blame it on demons or the Fae. Both she and the Royal Priest are very good at that sort of propaganda.”

“Jak, even with your abilities, this is a task beyond what we can do. And where would we stop? Even if we dethroned the queen, who would maintain order? And what about other nations to the east or south of the mountains? Do we weed out injustice there too? And with whom? We don’t have the army, and we can’t be everywhere at once.”

“Perhaps not yet,” said Jak, also coming to her feet. “But you remember Seph’s book? It promises that a place of peace will be established. More Fae will come, we’ll find the remaining Pillars of Eternity, and then we’ll have the power to save all those people. Perhaps not everyone, and not for forever. But we can do something now, here.”

“Hang on,” Naem cut in. “‘the remaining Pillars of Eternity?’ Are

you saying you've found such a Relic?"

Jak cursed her slip up. They still didn't know if they could trust Naem entirely. She certainly didn't. Even if he was trustworthy, he couldn't speak for everyone in the group. Though she supposed that secret was sprung now that the queen had seen her power in action.

"Yes, we have," she said after a moment's hesitation.

A ripple passed through the newcomers. Smiles and looks of wonder covered their faces. Even Naem was looking at Jak in a new light. She wasn't sure she liked it.

"But we still don't know much about its capabilities and we can't rely on it fully until we do." Skellig finally stopped pacing and sat back on the stump. "So, I suggest we discuss our immediate concerns before we tackle the big picture, starting with what to do with all of you."

11

"Hey Jak!" Naem called out from behind her as she walked back to the main camp. She closed her eyes. Why did he have to talk to her now? Didn't he realize there were bigger things to think about.

Trying to soften her frown, she turned to face the man who gave her up to the Royal Priest. Skellig had given him and the rest of his group free reign to the camp, and arranged for them to share living quarters with some of the others, provided they work to make their own tents and contribute to the gathering of provisions.

Skellig didn't trust them completely, though, and rightly so. One of the Shadow Fae followed Naem from a short distance away, and others of the Fae or Watchers were assigned to shadow the rest. Naem assured all of them that there would be no trouble, but he didn't blame them for being cautious. He was going along with everything just fine, which went a long way towards the others trusting him, though Jak still did not like the idea of trusting him. Things had been so much easier when she'd just assumed he had simply stayed with the Watchers doing the queen's bidding. It had been easier to hate him then. Now…

"What do you want, Naem?" She didn't bother to hide the cold in her voice.

Naem drew up short. "I...I just. Look I know we didn't end on a happy note."

Jak sniffed. That was understatement.

"And I'm not asking to go back to our past relationship in any way. I realize that I messed up and I have to deal with that. We've both moved on to other things. I just hope we might be able to work together in the future."

Jak looked up at the sky, trying to process everything and not get mad at Naem for bringing this up now. "I don't know if this is the best time to talk about our relationship, Naem."

"And I get that. I'm not asking for it. But can we at least remove this...shadow between us? I want to be friends. Not more than friends," he said putting his arms out defensively. "And maybe not

even friends. But I want to help. Can you accept that?"

"Naem, I don't think I can ever forget what you did. Even when I know why you did it, I can't bring myself to forgive you. Not yet. I nearly died, and so did Gabriel, Amelia, Seph, who knows how many others."

Naem hung his head. "I know." He did not even bother to give an excuse this time. That was something.

"Perhaps," said Jak, choosing her words carefully. "You should be more concerned with proving yourself trustworthy before you go around asking all of us to be friends with you again.And understand it will take a long time before any of us will fully trust you again. I'm not sure if I ever will, not completely."

"I understand," said Naem, nodding. "I can't ask for more than that chance to prove myself. I won't let you down."

"See that you don't, because there won't be another chance." Jak turned to walk away.

"And Jak," he said once her back was turned. She paused but did not face him. "I still care for you. I won't do anything to hurt you again."

Jak said nothing. What could she say? She couldn't lie and say she still cared for him too, but she couldn't tell him the truth either. In all honesty, she really wished he would leave. If he wanted to fight the queen in his own way, that was fine. But why did he have to come here?

So she chose to say nothing, only walking away to find her tent, or better yet, Seph's tent. He always knew how to make her feel better, and he probably wanted an update on the news Naem had brought with him.

She switched direction and began weaving through the many tents. She passed former Watcher soldiers and some of Seph's followers, though they were easily outnumbered by the Fae intermingled among them. They had a good thing happening here. Fae and humans lived among each other in peace, at least they had peace among themselves. If only they could deal with the queen's army, to get those who were truly fearful of the Fae to understand that they were not a threat.

But they were a threat. The realization sank like a dull knife, cutting deeper into her heart. The queen had been right to fear them. Now that they knew what the queen was doing, they would have to retaliate. People would die, human and Fae alike, before they came to a peaceful conclusion. And who was to say it would end peacefully? Yes, they could have peace for a time, but how long would it last? Once Jak and the rest of them were dead and gone, how long before fears again took hold and fighting broke out?

Seph's tent appeared as she rounded a corner. It was just as modest

as the rest of them, which matched Seph's personality perfectly. He wasn't one who sought after praise. He was a man the common person could follow. He was a leader in the best sense of the word, and he lead by example. Half of the humans in the camp were here because of him, not because of Jak.

They needed more people like Seph. People who truly had no personal motives other than to help others. Her father had been like that. While reclusive, he had never hesitated to help when someone needed him. From a neighboring villager to one of his own sheep, he would always go out of his way to help.

Jak stopped walking to Seph's tent. Suddenly she felt like she needed something else, and not his comfort. She had too much going on in her head, and she needed to sort it all out, away from all the noise. Seph would likely give her a sermon anyway. That wouldn't help.

Slowly, she turned and began walking away from Seph's tent, hoping against hope that he didn't suddenly emerge and call to her. She let out a small sigh of relief when she rounded the nearest corner.

Doing her best to block out all the noise surrounding her from passing Fae and soldiers, she thought through her options. What she really needed right now was some quiet, and there wasn't much of that to be had here. She thought about going to the river to have another talk with Amelia. But even that didn't feel right. Amelia would just try to make her feel better, and that wasn't exactly what Jak needed either. If they were considering such drastic action as overthrowing the queen, it wouldn't necessarily be a good thing to feel better about it. These were serious matters. Her father had always taught her not to treat such things lightly.

She turned to look west, towards the river and the plains beyond. Perhaps she needed to confront a darker part of her heart first. Was that what was holding her back now? Was that what troubled her?

What would her father do? That was the question that nagged at her now. Would he fight, or would he hide? In a sense, he had already done the latter when he had first encountered the changed Shadow Fae and took Jak away from her mother. That had been the passive route, but had it been the right one?

She knew what she needed to do. It was time to revisit her old town of Riverbrook. She wasn't sure what answers she would find there, perhaps none, but she had been putting it off for too long, choosing to hide from her past by remaining in their little camp.

She marched towards the south west corner of the camp. It was on her way out, but that was also where she would find her mother's camp. If anyone could understand why she needed to leave, it would be her mother. And someone had to know where she was, in case they

needed her.

It didn't take very long for her to find her mother, who was coordinating shifts to watch the newcomers. As Jak approached, Karlona whispered something to the Fae surrounding her, and they quickly dispersed.

"Hello mother," Jak said as she arrived. She wrapped her arms around the Shadow Fae in a hug. They hadn't known each other for much more than a year, but already they had grown close. Though perhaps not in the same way that Jak and her father had been close. Even though she and her father had some quarrels, she had never met someone else that she trusted more. Not yet.

"What is it?" Karlona said, breaking the embrace to gaze into Jak's eyes. "You seem troubled."

"I have to leave for a while," Jak said. "I won't be gone long, but I wanted to make sure someone knew."

"Where are you going?" Karlona asked. Thankfully she did not ask why, because Jak wasn't even exactly sure she could answer that question.

"Riverbrook," she said softly. A sorrowful expression touched Karlona's glowing green eyes. Yes, she understood as much as she needed to.

"Okay," her mother said. "I'll make sure the others know. Do you know when you will be back?"

"I don't." Jak confessed. "But it won't be long. I know people here need me."

"Jak?" Karlona placed both arms on Jak's shoulders. "I think he would be proud of you, of everything you've become. I know I am."

"Thank you, mother," she said, though she wasn't sure she believed it. Would her father be so proud of his little girl becoming a conqueror? Was that truly the role she was destined for? Or was there another way?

She grabbed a spear on her way out, found a shallow portion of the river, away from the Water Fae, and waded across. She wasn't sure she would find answers where she was going. But something waited for her out there.

12

Thatched roofs and stone structures became visible ahead of her as she grew closer to the town she had called home. She didn't go to her old farm. Not yet. It would take additional courage before she could confront the memories that she held there.

Though that was not to say this place did not terrify her. Though she hadn't known it at the time, the last time she entered the town of Riverbrook would turn out to be the most significant day of her life. First she had received her Gifter brand. That had seemed all important to her back then. If she could have only known that no less than an hour later, she would have lost her father, perhaps she would have picked a different brand of some kind, or at least fled with her father. Perhaps they could have gone off and found her mother together, or lived in Skyecliff.

She stopped walking as she approached the main street that led through what was left of the town. Stones had crumbled and the thatched roofs were patchy and burned in places. Many houses had no roofs at all. Could there really be this much damage and decay after just over a year?

Steeling herself, she took one step forward, then another. She proceeded down the muddy and overgrown street until she came to the market square. It too was covered in weeds and brambles, nature coming to claim the forgotten town.

Perhaps in the future, Jak could come back to this place, build it up as a home again. They had camped across the river instead of using these old structures mostly because of the proximity to the mountain pass. But once things were safer in the kingdom, perhaps people could live here again.

She spotted something in the center of the square, a dark patch that hadn't been overrun by weeds. That had been…

No! She could not deal with that memory just yet.

She continued down the street. There, at the corner of the market square, she spied the old shop that used to belong to Marek's parents. The roof had a gaping hole in it, and several beams of timber had

collapsed in.

Oh the memories she had of that place. One of her earliest was playing Watchers and Demons with Marek on the deck outside the store. His mother had berated them for playing such an awful game, and that it was insensitive to the real people that died fighting demons. In the end, she had been right, though at the time Jak had no idea just how scary demons could be. They didn't congregate in any large numbers back then. In fact, most demons were killed on the spot when created, and the Watcher's job was more to do with arresting the Gifter who did it. How had so much changed since that time?

Now Marek was dead, killed by a horde of demons along the walls of Foothold. Jak could only hope that when he had fallen from the battlements, he had died from the fall. Better that than what would have happened next. They never found a clearly identifiable body. Though they found many body parts, from multiple warriors that day.

Jak did her best to shake off that image, and moved on. This place was not helping her feel any sort of peace. If anything she felt more troubled, with thoughts of demons and lost friends.

The sun was already low in the sky. She would have to hurry if she wanted to get back before dark. Though she wasn't sure that's what she wanted.

Continuing on, she passed by the first place where she'd met Naem, just outside of the Lord Mayor's house, which stood on a slight incline. This had been another important place for her. Gabriel had given her the Gifter brand here. Both her relationships with Gabriel and Naem had gone on to affect her deeply. Even after betraying Jak, she could not argue that Naem had taught her a lot, almost more than Gabriel. No, she could not think about Naem right now. She'd come here to get away from all that. This was not the place.

She moved on, circling back this time and proceeding down a side street that ran parallel to the main street. Parts of this street were completely covered in tall grasses and weeds. Nature was taking over.

Resistance built up in Jak's legs. She knew where her feet were taking her, but she did not want to go. The market square was a block away to her right now. She glanced over and could barely see that dark patch she had spied earlier. That had been where her father died. The darkness had to be the blood of the demons that he killed. And his own blood.

And just ahead of her was the grave she had dug with her own hands. The mound was clearly visible. Grass and lavender flowers had grown on its surface.

She raised a hand to her face, wiping the tears that suddenly formed there, and knelt next to the final resting place of her father, Rael. She couldn't hold it back any longer.

All the pain of the last year came flooding out of her. The pain of losing her father, her friend, of being driven from her home, of battling Kuldain and later Cain, of being persecuted by the queen and forced to become the Fae's champion, of being betrayed by Naem.

She wept in great heaving sobs, not bothering to cover them up. The sounds echoed against the empty houses, with no response. The structures were monuments to her pain, to her losses. No, she didn't think she could ever live here again. Not with this.

"I'm sorry I couldn't save you," she choked through her tears. "If only I was better prepared."

She knew that the person she was now could have easily defended her father from those demons. She was the match of a hundred demons, perhaps far more, thanks to Naem's training and her extra brands. The thought pierced her heart.

A rumble came from not far away, over and around a large tree that overlooked the makeshift gravesite. Jak's head shot up, her tears still staining her face. That hadn't sounded like a human, nor the sound of approaching hooves. Was it a demon or a stray animal?

Carefully, she tiptoed towards the large tree, readying her spear as she did so.

The rumble came again, though this time it sounded more like two rocks sliding against each other. Once Jak rounded the tree she got her first good look.

Standing about fifty paces away was one of the new type of Fae, the 'trolls' as Girwirt had named them. This one was enormous, at least three feet higher than the others they had fought. He must have stood at least twelve feet high.

Jak stilled her breath. All she had was a spear and her own branded abilities, all of which would be useless against one of these things. Perhaps she should think of giving herself a Thunder brand later. She should have thought of that before leaving, as it would really come in handy right now.

Slowly, she began taking several steps back, never taking her eye away from the lumbering beast, who was pawing at the ground as if searching for something. It hadn't seen her yet.

Her foot stepped on a twig, and it snapped with a sound that seemed to echo around her. She froze in place.

The troll paused, and suddenly its electrifying eyes swung up to stare directly at Jak. But it did not attack, not immediately. Perhaps if she could show it that she wasn't a threat…

She set the spear down. It wouldn't be much use against this thing anyway. With both hands raised in a gesture of nonviolence, she took another step backward, and then another.

"HMMM" the beast grunted and it came, its footsteps shaking the

ground around Jak.

She stumbled backward in her attempt to run, but somehow her feet became entangled and she tripped. With the troll about to barrell into her, she raised both hands high above her head and screamed. “Please, I just want to talk!”

The troll stopped short.

Jak’s breathing came in huge, frequent gulps, her chest heaving with adrenaline. But the air was still, and the beast considered her with those strange purple eyes.

“Can...can you understand me?” she asked tentatively, still not bothering to move an inch.

It said nothing, but cocked its head slightly. Maybe it was trying to make sense of the words.

Moving as slowly as she dared, she raised herself up on her elbows and began crawling forward onto her knees.

The beast opened what appeared to be a mouth, which was more of a gap between two rocky protrusions. It rumbled something loud and took one aggressive step forward.

“It’s okay, it’s okay.” Jak thrust both hands out again. “I’m not going to hurt you.” If only she could convince this thing that she couldn’t hurt it even if she tried.

Placing one hand on her chest, she said, “My name is Jak. Do you have a name?”

Once again the troll’s head tilted as she spoke. Odd that a species of Fae seemed so primal in their intelligence. In the past, all of the Fae retained everything that made them who they were before they changed. But with these creatures, there didn’t seem to be much left of the original person. Jak wasn’t sure how she felt about that. Was becoming a Fae truly as harmless as she wanted everyone to believe?

“Can you talk?” she pointed at her mouth. “Talk?”

“HMMM,” it rumbled. It proceeded to make a number of odd sounds.

“Are you trying to say something?”

“MMMEH HARRGH!” it stamped on the ground, throwing both arms into the air as if in frustration. A thought occurred to Jak.

“Are you trying to speak but can’t do so?”

The troll considered her, then gave the barest hint of a nod.

Jak let out a whoop, and the troll shrank away from her slightly, studying her with its eyes. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I didn’t mean to scare you. I’m just glad you understand me.”

“HARAGMMM” it tried to speak once more, but nothing intelligible came out. Once again it stamped its feet on the ground in frustration.

“If you can’t speak, could you maybe write it down?” Jak bent low

and ran a finger through the dirt next to the tree.

The troll paused long enough for Jak to wonder if it had heard her correctly. Even if it could understand her, its mind was definitely different than whoever he had been before. There was a definite primitive quality to the enormous Fae.

Then, with an impact that shook the tree Jak stood by, it fell to its knees. Reaching with one finger, it began carving huge letters into the ground with its rocky fingers.

Jak took the opportunity to try and move closer. The beast didn't seem to mind this time. All of its attention was focused on the word it was trying to write. When it finished, it turned to Jak expectantly.

On the ground lay a single word. The handwriting was sloppy, but Jak could just make it out.

"Lost?" she faced the giant. "You're saying you're lost?"

It did not nod like before. Instead it stared blankly, as if trying to decipher what Jak was saying.

Jak pointed at the word. "Are you lost?"

Slowly, it shook its head.

"What does it mean?" she asked, pointing at the word and keeping her voice calm. She couldn't afford to lose patience with a being like this.

The troll raised both massive hands and pointed at itself.

"You? I don't understand, you just said you're not lost."

The troll jabbed its fingers at itself again, as if trying to make a point that she was not getting. She stared sightlessly. "HRM!" it growled and pointed a finger at the word, then at its chest.

"I don't understand," said Jak. "You're not lost but you are?"

It then thrust out another finger pointing directly at Jak, then at the word, then back at its chest. Okay, this made no sense at all.

"Can you write something else to clarify what you're trying to say?" she offered.

The troll growled and threw its hands in the air. It did not sound happy. Once again it pointed at himself, then at Jak, then at the word.

"I'm not lost. Is that what you're asking?"

This was clearly not the right answer, for the troll bellowed and smashed a boulder of a hand into the large tree, causing splinters to fly.

"It's okay!" Jak said, taking a single step back. "I believe you're trying to tell me something. Let's just figure it out together."

It didn't make a sound for several seconds after that, looking from her to the word. Then it stared away to the south, like a dog hearing some kind of sound that Jak could not discern.

Then with great, rumbling footsteps, it began to walk away.

"Wait. We can figure it out, you don't have to leave." said Jak.

It did not appear to hear her, but kept walking to the south, towards the edge of the abandoned town. But after several paces it stopped and turned to look at her, expectantly. Then it resumed its walk for several more paces before turning once again to meet her eyes. Did it want her to follow?

Well, she couldn't see why she shouldn't. This was, after all, the only progress they'd seen from these trolls. Perhaps if Jak could get through to one of them, they might all refrain from attacking their camp. It was worth a shot. And it was headed in the general direction of her old farm. Maybe she would get a chance to revisit those old memories as well, if she could find a way to deal with the pain they would bring.

Jak fell into step behind the massive, rocky Fae.

13

The troll continued its gait with slow steps that nevertheless covered so much distance that Jak occasionally had to jog to keep up. It did not grunt or make any other sound as they traveled. And it didn't pause to look at Jak once she started following. Its eyes were fixed straight ahead.

Jak's old farm stood a little over two miles to the south of Riverbrook, so it took some time to get there. Jak tried once or twice to engage with the troll in conversation, but it did nothing to acknowledge that she was there.

Eventually, Jak stopped trying, choosing instead to fix her gaze on the familiar path ahead of them. She had come this way so many times in her youth. Had it only been a little over a year since she left? It felt like so long ago.

She swallowed as two large structures grew in her vision. The first and largest was the old barn, which like everything in the town of Riverbrook, had been overrun by nature, parts of it fallen into disrepair. The second building was her old home, not a large building, but one in which she had never lacked for anything.

Jak took a deep breath, feeling a rush of emotions crowd her mind. It had been so long.

But the troll did not seem to be walking to the old farm. They grew closer only for the giant Fae to walk right on by, hardly noticing that there was anything there at all. Though shortly after passing, he turned off the road and began walking into one of the grazing fields that Jak had spent her childhood in, making sure that all of the sheep remained safe from predators or from becoming lost. The grass had grown here too, though only in patches. It was still easy to navigate as she followed the troll.

All of a sudden, the giant beast stopped short, and Jak walked up beside him. He was staring into the distance, towards the edge of the field and the mountain's foothills beyond. Then it bent down and carved a word into the ground. Jak drew closer to see.

"Lost?" she said. "Why is that so important to you?"

It raised a big hand and pointed at something Jak could not see, somewhere off towards the foothills.

Hesitantly, she took a step forward. “Is there something out there you want me to see?”

The beast inclined its head.

“Can you show me where?”

It shook its head.

“You want me to go alone?”

Once again, it nodded. Jak took a deep breath. Well, at least she was making progress with this thing. Hopefully it wasn’t leading her into a den of wolves or something.

“Okay, I’ll go in that direction. If I can’t find anything, I’ll come back, understand? Please don’t leave.”

It said nothing but stood like a statue as she headed off in the direction it had pointed.

Jak travelled about a hundred yards ahead of them, two hundred. When she had gone over three hundred yards she turned to see the troll was still standing where she had left him. What was it he wanted her to find out here? There was nothing but grass and…

A sound caused her head to whip around.

Something rustled in the tall grass ahead of her, and Jak thought she could barely make out something that didn’t quite blend in with the rest of its backdrop. Carefully, she crouched low and got her spear ready.

As she took two steps forward, whatever it was lurched into motion. Jak braced herself, but it wasn’t coming at her. It was running away. Jak caught a good look at the creature just as it reached a patch of bare ground.

She stood straight and laughed. It was a sheep, and it was covered from head to toe in the thickest coat of wool she had ever seen. Once a safe distance away it trotted to a stop. Could this be one of her father’s old sheep? How had it survived all this time without getting eaten by wolves?

They had thought most of their flock killed by demons. Perhaps this one had gotten lost and managed to avoid the massacre all together.

‘Lost.’ Was that what the troll had meant when he spelled out the word? Had he just wanted to show her the lost sheep so she could help? If that were the case it had been right to send someone else. The huge monstrosity would have frightened the poor sheep to death.

“Hey there,” Jak said, letting the animal hear the sound of her voice. If it was one of her father’s sheep, it might recognize her.

Sure enough, the animal stopped running away from her the moment she said something. She whistled softly as she took a step

closer, and then another step. It scampered away a bit, clearly not used to having a human around again. After some time spent chasing it, she finally managed to wrap her arms around the incredibly thick woolen coat. “There, I’ve got you.”

She led the sheep back towards her old home. Hopefully the shears were still untouched. They should be, assuming no one had looted the place. And who would steal sheep shears anyway?

In the distance she spotted the troll. He was watching them but remained rooted to the spot where she had left him. The sheep managed to get a look at the thing through the wool closing in on its eyes. Even from this distance, Jak had to coax the little thing to follow and not run away from the troll.

She could understand the sheep’s hesitation. Her recent interactions with the troll had not made her forget that people had died at the hands of this new Fae. They were not to be taken lightly. She just wished she knew why it had brought her to find this sheep. Did it care for the thing somehow, or did it have other motives? Perhaps he just wanted a meal. Jak shoved that thought aside. That was not productive thinking at all.

She entered the barn with the sheep trailing behind her, growing much more confident now that they were out of range of the troll, and it was getting used to Jak’s presence. He was getting excited. Perhaps he knew that he was about to lose his burdensome woolen coat.

A wave of nostalgia blanketed Jak as she stared at the tools lining the barn walls. Not long ago this had been her life, the only life she ever knew. It felt good falling into familiar steps as she found a pair of shears in the back. They were a bit rusty, but they would work. She set to work shearing the sheep of its cumbersome outer layer.

The sheep resisted, as they usually did, and Jak had to hold it down while she worked. The rhythmic, metalic sound of the shears sliding together brought her back to those old times. This was soothing. She needed this.

Once the work was done, she let the sheep go, and it bounded around the barn letting out excited bleats now that it was free of its burden.

“That’s right,” she said. “I’ll bet that feels so much better. You’re safe now, little one. I’ll make sure you can come back with me. And I won’t let anyone eat you, I promise.”

The rumble of troll footsteps sounded from outside. The sheep bleated and began running around wildly, though it had nowhere to go.

“I’ll take care of that, don’t worry,” she said.

Keeping the sheep confined in the barn, she exited and went out to meet the approaching troll. It stood next to her house, its head rising

above the rafters and regarding her with those eyes like lightning.

"Thank you for bringing me the sheep. Is that what you meant by the word 'lost'?"

It hesitated, nodded, but then shook its head after that.

"Yes and no?" Boy this thing was tricky to figure out.

It pointed at itself, then pointed at her. Lastly it pointed at the barn, presumably at the sheep.

"Are you saying that we're all lost?"

A sharp incline of its head confirmed she had finally figured it out. But what did that mean? She wasn't lost, not like the sheep anyway.

The troll raised a hand to point at the barn, then used its other hand to point at the mountains, towards where Jak had found the sheep. Then, curiously, it pointed at Jak with one hand, and pointed at its chest with the other, where the heart should be. Finally, it used both hands to gesture at itself, then pointed specifically at its head.

Hang on, he was beginning to make some sense here. "I think I might understand what you're trying to say. You're saying the sheep was lost out there, and that I'm lost…" she trailed off.

It pointed at its chest again.

"I'm lost in the heart?" she guessed.

A sharp jab of the head. Yes, that's what he meant.

"And you're lost in the head?" she said, remembering his last motion.

Once again, it nodded. Now it was starting to make sense. Being lost in the head might have something to do with its seeming inability to speak or communicate effectively. Perhaps whoever had turned into this troll was still in there somehow, but without the same mental faculties as before.

But then what did it mean that she was lost in the heart? Could the thing possibly know what she had been going through emotionally to come back to her old town? Had it seen the tears she had shead over her father's grave?

"I...I think you may be right about me," she whispered, almost to herself, though loud enough for the giant Fae to hear. "And I want to help you how I can. I know adjusting to that new body must be frustrating for you."

The thing pointed at her with one arm, and at the barn with the other, then moved that arm to point at himself.

"Yes, I'd like to help you like I helped the sheep. I just don't know how." Her eyes grew slack and she stared off into the distance. "There's still a lot that I don't know."

And that much was true. She may have found a Pillar of Eternity, she may have escaped from one of the most powerful villains alive, she may have killed countless demons, she may even be this

prophesied Oren. But she still couldn't perform a stable Telekinesis brand, she didn't have everyone's trust, she still made tactical mistakes, and she even questioned the path ahead of her. Could she overthrow the queen and create a better society for the Fae and everyone to live in? Or would she simply replace one tyrant with another?

He fears you, the words came unbidden to her mind. Her father's words, some of the last that he had ever said to her. She now knew the person he had been talking about was Cain, whom she had only just managed to escape in Mt. Harafast. How could someone with that much power fear her?

What would her father think of everything that had happened?

"Wait here," she said to the troll. "I'll be back soon."

14

The troll did nothing to object, and she rounded the house until she was at the main entrance. The door was still on its hinges, though it had blown open, and there was a hole in the roof. As she entered the door, she was surprised to see how much was still there as she had left it.

That had been one fateful morning when they'd first left. Jak shivered as she remembered that helpless feeling when a dark force woke her. That had been Cain, though she hadn't known it at the time. Had her father known? He had certainly seemed worried that morning, though Jak had thought it was just because of the massacred sheep. Had it been something more?

They left in a hurry that morning, and most of their possessions remained behind. Much of it was still here. Not even looters had come through here, though there were precious few items of value in their house. Her father had brought his old Watcher spear with him, which was the only real thing of value they had possessed.

Jak wandered into her old room, scaring a poor family of mice who had taken shelter under her bed. Jak gazed at the familiar space. Odd that she should feel almost nothing at seeing her old room again. Had she really moved on that completely that this place held nothing for her?

She stepped across the hall into what had been her father's room. The roof was still intact on this side of the house, and while a thick layer of dust coated the room, all else was as they left it.

She ran a hand over her father's bed post, and sat down on the thin mattress. The room was musty, but there was something familiar here as well, something she hadn't even felt in her own room. Was it the smell?

Yes, that had something to do with it. Even after all this time, under the dust and mildew she could faintly make out an earthy aroma. Jak hadn't even thought about it before, but it was the smell of home.

Like before at her father's grave, tears began to well in her eyes.

But this time it wasn't because she missed her father, or the fact that she had failed him. It was the fact that part of him still existed. He was still here, in this place.

And he was still with her.

She could almost hear him speaking to her, telling her that he did not blame her for his death.

"But if the person I am now had been there, you wouldn't have died," she said to the empty air. She didn't wipe away her tears.

If I had not died, you would not be the person you are now. The thought came unbidden to Jak's mind. It sank deep into her heart, and lodged itself there. She rose to her feet in an instant, kicking up the dust that had settled.

But of course, no one had said anything. Yet those were words he would have spoken, without a doubt.

But if her father had not died, things would have been better, right? She would have gone on to Skyecliff with her father, stayed to learn at the college, and likely risen to the highest academic honors. She could just imagine her father's face at the presentation of her letter of graduation, or entering official service as a Gifter. She wouldn't have offended the queen, wouldn't be in the predicament she was in now, wouldn't have been betrayed by her friends.

Wouldn't have found the Fae.

Wouldn't have discovered her ability to give multiple brands.

Wouldn't have saved countless soldiers and civilians from the jaws of a demon.

If she hadn't been thrust on that journey with the death of her father, none of this would have happened. Like it or not, she was a changed woman because of that crucial moment. That voice, whether it was in her head or came from somewhere beyond, was right.

The tears stopped flowing.

"I am sorry—" she said out loud. "—that we could not have spent more time together. But I do not regret the experiences I've had since."

A soft breeze from the next room enveloped her, as though wrapping her in an assuring hug.

This was her calling. It was her responsibility to help the Fae, and all those who suffered under the oppression of Queen Telma or Cain. That was a responsibility she had to accept, even if it meant making the hard choices. In that moment she knew that her father would support her if he was still alive.

Perhaps somewhere, he was smiling on her.

An enormous weight seemed to rise from her shoulders. Suddenly the room grew brighter, the setting sun beaming through the windows and damaged roof, bathing her old home in a golden glow.

It was time to leave these old memories behind. Time to make new ones.

Turning on her heel, she walked outside. The troll had not moved from where he stood before she went in. He stared at her without making a sound.

“You were right,” she said, coming close to where he stood. “I was lost in my heart. But perhaps not anymore.”

Something bright seemed to flash in the beast’s eyes. Was he smiling? It didn’t look like his maw of a mouth had the muscles for it.

“I just need to confirm one thing,” she said, stooping to pick up a pebble at her feet. The troll tilted its head at her.

“Gabriel said I had a block holding me back from performing a Telekinesis brand,” she said, not talking to anyone in particular. “The brand of my father.”

Her Gifter brand flashed to life, and the troll took a step backward at the suddenness of it. Black lines crisscrossed along the surface of the pebble, forming the bird-like shape of a Telekinesis brand.

When the light from her Gifter brand faded, she held the pebble in front of her. If she had messed up the branding, it would typically float aimlessly in the air. It did not do so. There was no other confirmation that it had worked, but no reaction was exactly what she wanted.

The pebble was nothing but confirmation of what she now understood deep in her soul. She had always had the brand inside of her, but she’d kept it hidden.

No longer.

For the second time, her Gifter brand shone with an inner light. Gently, she rested the tip of that hand on her forehead, and closed her eyes.

A light pain marked the spot where the lines were forming, etching themselves into the flesh of her forehead. As it formed, she felt the memory of her father become a permanent part of herself. It had been there all along.

The act complete, she let her hand drop. All was calm, and she knew that she had done it. A perfect Telekinesis brand lay prominent on her forehead, the memory of the man she had lost, of the man who had given his life for her, an act that had allowed her to save countless others. A hero.

The troll continued to stare at her curiously. She met its eyes. “Come with me,” she said. “I can ensure they don’t hurt you. You can prove that your people are not dangerous.”

The light of its eyes narrowed. Was it considering her offer or just trying to decipher her intentions?

Finally, it shook its head. He raised an arm and pointed at the

mountains. “LAAAAAHST.” it bellowed at her. It was the first time he’d said anything resembling a word.

Jak smiled. “I understand,” she said. “You need to find the others like you. The ones that are lost.”

It nodded, its eyes drooping in something akin to sadness.

“Do you still feel lost.”

It hesitated a moment before shaking its head.

“Me neither,” Jak said, and lifted a hand to gently place it on the creature’s arm. It stared at the hand, as though trying to comprehend the significance of what she was doing. Then its eyes met hers once more before it turned and launched itself at the mountains, causing the entire earth to quake around it.

Jak let out a deep breath. Well, she had work to do.

Remembering the lost sheep, she returned to the barn. “Come now, we need to find a safe place for you too.” She opened the pen to guide the frightened animal home.

Half way back to the river she heard the sound of hooves in the grass, and looked up to see Seph on horseback.

“Seph?” she asked as he drew closer.

“I’m glad I found you,” he said, pulling the horse to a halt. His eyes drifted to the mark on her forehead and a smile split his face. “I take it your little excursion was a productive one?”

“You might say that,” said Jak, returning his smile. When was the last time she had smiled like that? Something truly had been lifted from her.

He swung himself off the horse, gracefully. Jak pursed her lips in a half-smile as she watched him do so. If it weren’t for the odd situation they were in, she would have considered deepening their relationship. Perhaps nothing serious, but just becoming better friends or something. But with the queen at their doorstep, and these new Fae, she really didn’t have time to think about all that. Still, she really did love the feeling of his arms around her. She was about to move forward for a hug when she caught a glimpse of his face. “What’s wrong?” she asked as his smile gave way to a creased forehead.

“There are demons approaching from the east. A lot of them. I was sent to bring you back.”

The news stilled her heart. So, Cain was finally making his move. She squared her shoulders. Perhaps now they would see more of the demon king. Well, nothing to do but to meet him head on. All thoughts of her relationship with Seph faded, for now, as they both rode the horse back to camp, a frightened sheep in tow behind them.

15

"They're staying put for now." Skellig was pacing back and forth in the council clearing. "It's reminding me a little too much of Foothold, only this time we don't have the protection of a fortress." She stopped pacing and ran her hands through her short, blonde hair.

"We knew that Cain would attack eventually," said Jak smoothly. She glanced at everyone else present. Her mother, Seph, Gabriel, Amelia, Yewin, Girwirt, and Noralim. How had she not put any thought into how amazing it was that they were all working together like this?

"That doesn't change the fact that we are now outnumbered. By hundreds to one. That is not a number we can compete against," Skellig barked. "We have to retreat into the mountain."

"Is the queen still making her retreat?" Jak asked.

Skellig shook her head. "Turns out that was just a ruse. They retreated as far back as the main road and met up with some reinforcements from Tradehall. They're keeping their distance for now, probably hoping that we and the demons wipe each other out."

"Before they step in to clean up the mess," said Gabriel, stroking his dark beard.

"Exactly," Skellig said, going back to pacing.

"But if the demons attack us, that would go against her claim that the demons and Fae are the same thing, and working together." Amelia said from her corner of the clearing.

"Telma will find a way to spin it," Seph folded his arms. "She always does. Anyway, right now she has the perfect evidence that we *are* working together."

Jak frowned. "How so?"

"Well as long as that army doesn't attack us, she'll just assume that they're here to reinforce us. She'll consider it another aggressive act." Seph laughed, though there was no humor in it. "I can hear her now, spreading the word that you are the mastermind behind the demons."

"But that argument would fall apart if they did attack us, right?" Karlona had her hands on her hips. "Or...what if we attacked them

first?"

"Unless they plan to lay down and die we would stand no chance against an army of that size," said Skellig. "There has to be at least five thousand demons out there."

Jak's knees weakened. "Five thousand?" She should have asked for that statistic up front.

"Yes, and Queen Telma's army is nearly as large. We'd have no chance against either, let alone both."

"What if," Girwirt was tapping one finger on his forehead. "What if we got them to fight each other?"

"Do you have any suggestions?" said Skellig, eyeing the little gnome. "If it could happen, then perhaps we'd have a chance. But from what we, and you especially my dear gnome, know about the mind behind the demons, we know they're most likely after us."

"Yes, and that brings us to the main question." Gabriel's voice was gruff. "We now know that demons, at least these demons, do not act randomly as we once supposed. They have a commander, this Cain you told us of. What is his angle?"

This time all eyes turned to Jak, some of them still eyeing her new brand, but everyone listening. She hesitated. What *was* Cain's angle? Did he want them dead? If so, why were the demons waiting? They could probably destroy them all before the queen could even react. And Skellig was right, it was unlikely that the demons were here to attack the queen.

"I don't know," she said at last. "Has he been spotted anywhere among the army?"

"No," said Skellig. "I've had Sightseers watching them non-stop, and they've reported nothing but demons."

"Then perhaps they're only waiting for him to arrive," it was a weak theory, and Jak knew it. If Cain could control the demons from a distance, which was clearly possible, then there would be no reason for him to be here at all. But Skellig seemed to accept her theory for now.

"In any event," said Skellig. "We must assume they will attack us sooner or later. Our only hope of surviving such an attack will be in the mountains. I cannot stress how important it is that we leave."

"Is everyone ready?" asked Jak.

Skellig nodded. "We were ready to leave long before they came, thanks to the queen."

"And what about Naem and the people he brought?"

Skellig hesitated. "They'll have to come with us. Either that or leave them to the demons. You don't suppose they have anything to do with their arrival, do you?"

Jak shook her head. "No, I don't. I know Naem well enough to

know he'd never side with demons." He'd side with scumbags, but he wasn't so far gone as to support a person like Cain.

"Very well, we'll take them with us. We should start immediately," Skellig said.

"Then let's do it. No point in wasting more time on words."

"It will be tight quarters," said Seph. "Especially for the Water Fae."

"Skellig's right, we have no choice right now."

"We'll be fine," said Noralim. "We gnomes and dwarves are used to confined spaces. We can lead you right through, no problem."

"I'll spread the word," said Skellig, not bothering to mince words any longer. Jak gave her a final confirming nod, and the major left the clearing.

The group disbanded, each going back to their own people or Fae, but Jak caught up with Gabriel before he went too far, falling into step beside him.

"I wish we had time for you to explain that brand on your forehead." He was smiling at her.

"It's a long story, and I will need to tell you about it eventually," said Jak. They would all need to hear about her encounter with the new Fae, but that seemed like less of a priority at the moment. Once they were safely away she would mention it.

"At any rate, I am incredibly proud of you. Am I right in guessing that your block had something to do with your father?"

"Yes, I believe it did," said Jak. "I wish I had listened to you sooner."

Gabriel shrugged. "These kind of blocks are not so easily removed as all that. You have to figure it out on your own, not because an old man like me told you so." He winked at her.

"Have you done any more research on the Pillar of Eternity?" said Jak as they passed several soldiers hurrying to load up their wagons.

"I have indeed, and I'm afraid I've found no answers. It is a powerful Relic to be sure, perhaps so powerful that our conventional methods of study are obsolete."

"Do you think it's safe?"

Gabriel hesitated, "I'm not sure about that. Its power does seem to be similar to those other Relics that created the Fae, so it's unpredictable."

"Is it dangerous in any other way?" Jak probed further.

"No, not in any way I can see. I haven't made much progress to be completely honest. I get the distinct impression that it doesn't like me. Or at the very least, it doesn't see me as important."

"It chose me," said Jak. "I doubt it would work for anyone else."

"Not even Cain? Because that would be a huge relief off my mind."

Jak opened her mouth to say something, but closed it again. She'd thought about that too. What if Cain stole it from her? Would he suddenly be as unstoppable as she had been when wielding the staff?

"I don't know," she said after they'd walked a short distance. "I'd have to imagine that someone with his power could eventually get it to work, no matter who it chose."

"Best not to let it fall into his hands no matter what."

"Which is why I need you to give it back to me."

Gabriel looked at her sharply. "I don't have to explain the risks to you. If more of those things were to pop out of the ground…"

"I know the risks," said Jak. They stopped outside of Gabriel's tent. People all around them were packing the last of their things, getting ready to move out. Jak paid no attention to any of them.

"Well I certainly won't stop you. Just understand that we are no nearer to understanding its magic than before this all started."

"I know."

"What are you going to do with it, if I may ask?"

Jak expression was made of stone. "I'm going to pay a visit to that demon army."

16

A sea of sweaty, filthy demon bodies lay before her, their stench of rotten flesh threatening to suffocate her.

Jak stood, with the Pillar of Eternity grasped firmly in one hand, her father's spear in the other, both with the butt of their shafts fixed in the ground.

Time seemed to stretch around her, just as the shadows of the demons stretched as the sun went down in the west behind her.

These had once been people. So many people corrupted by bad branding, or possibly worse. How had Cain managed to bring so many demons? Where did he get all those people?

Jak drew a little closer, so that the nearest demon was close enough that she could have reached out and touched him with the tip of her staff. The demon snarled at her, snapping its jaws and staring at her with those wild, all-too-human eyes. Demon eyes were among the most disconcerting things she had ever seen. They always appeared wide and bloodshot. Terrified.

And yet the demon did not attack, did not even move a muscle. Only its head moved, gnashing its teeth at her.

"Where are you, Cain!" she called out. Her voice echoed across the horde of formerly human bodies. Yet no sound greeted her in return, other than the collective snarls of the demons. More of them were beginning to notice her now, and that only increased the snarls they sent her way.

"I'm here for you! I have the Pillar of Eternity," she called again. "Are you so scared of its power that you will not face me?"

No reaction. The demons remained in place, and she could see no change in their behavior.

She raised her arm with the spear in it, calling on a new well of power within her, one that had been begging to be used since she obtained it.

The nearest demon rose into the air, held by the power of Telekinesis, the power that her father had once mastered, the power she now held.

The beast's head swivelled in confusion, aware at some level of what was happening to it, but unable to do anything in response.

"Find me, Cain! Or I will destroy your army."

She could do it too. She felt the power inside of her, and contained in the Pillar of Eternity. She was a match for thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands of demons. What had she to fear from them?

Her grip on her spear tightened and in her mind she reached out to the demon she held in the air. The air around it condensed, and she squeezed with all her mental ability.

The demon's gnashing turned to soft cries, and those cries turned to human screams as the air around it closed in. With a soft crunch, its screams ceased abruptly.

A part of Jak might have hesitated at hearing those screams, knowing she was the cause. But demons were not like Fae. They did not belong, and for all intents and purposes, were already dead. She was performing a merciful act.

Perhaps the queen thought of the Fae in the same way, that exterminating them here was more of a mercy than not. Certainly anyone who believed that the Fae were no better than demons would think as much. But what would everyone think when they finally exposed the truth? They had to show these people that they were enemies of the demons as much as anyone. Indeed, the queen's biggest mistake had to be that of placing the blame on Jak and the Fae, when the real enemy was Cain and his demon hordes.

She had to be the one to set things right.

Telekinesis was one thing, but it was nothing compared to the power of the Pillar of Eternity. Silently, she called the power of time to her grasp.

All the world froze around her.

None of the demons moved, nor did they make a sound. They stood like sightless statues, as helpless now as they were in life.

With the power of time guiding her movements, she walked to the first demon, and stabbed it through the heart. Her spear emerged on the other side of its form, covered in black blood. She wrenched the spear out of the demon, its eyes still wide. Not enough time had passed for it to realize what had happened. Black drops of blood flew from the tip of the spear, hanging suspended in the air once they disconnected from the weapon.

Jak surveyed the damage, a hollow feeling of sorrow clenching her stomach. She didn't like it, but that did not mean it wasn't necessary. Just like it would be necessary to stop the queen, and appoint someone else in her stead. Someone who would understand the Fae, and help create a peaceful harmony between them and the rest of humankind. Yes, some things were necessary.

She stabbed the demon next to the first, then the next, and the next. One by one, she moved down the line, taking out demon after demon. This was almost too easy.

Though she had to be careful. The magic of the Pillar would wear on her eventually, and she might not be able to kill all five thousand of them before that happened. But she could cut down their numbers significantly, enough to prove to the queen's army that they were not in league with the demons, as the queen would no doubt claim.

But a darkness gathered around her mind, growing stronger with each demon she killed. Curse Cain for everything he had done in creating these creatures, in shaping them into his mindless pawns. He was the real villain here, not her. He had already killed these poor beings. Jak was just ensuring that they did no more harm before that reality caught up to them.

A wave of nausea coursed through her, suddenly and without warning. She choked and gagged, though nothing escaped her stomach. She hadn't eaten anything in days thanks to her new Hungerless brand. But that didn't stop her body from trying to heave up whatever was left. And for a moment, she lost control of the Pillar's magic.

Time rushed forward in an instant, but only for an instant as Jak regained control a second later. Time paused once again, and she let out a breath.

In that single second of passed time, all of the demons' heads had turned and were looking right at her.

Cain was watching.

She swallowed. What had just happened? Was it the fatigue from using the Pillar? That couldn't be it, because she'd used it for far longer before, and she didn't yet feel tired at all. Was Cain somehow behind it? From the way the demons were looking at her, she was sure that she had finally piqued his interest. He was seeing through their eyes as she worked the magic of the staff. Was he toying with her somehow?

No, something was familiar about this. She had felt a similar overwhelming and sudden nausea once before, when the Royal Priest had used one of the Holy Relics in some sort of pleasure ritual back in Skyecliff. She hadn't thought much of it since then, but perhaps there was a connection.

She stared down at the polished black staff in her hand. It was the only Relic nearby that could have done such a thing. Was it somehow responsible?

The black surface and silver runes on the Pillar of Eternity did nothing to answer her question. It had spoken to her when she first obtained the thing. Was it trying to tell her something now?

A few minutes passed while she regained her breath. Well, there was nothing to do but continue with what she had been doing. She turned back to the horde of demons, all of them eerily staring directly at her.

She stepped to the nearest one, and was halfway to the point of thrusting her spear into its chest, when the nausea hit again. She doubled over and retched, yet nothing came out. Once again, she nearly lost control of the magic. Or was it trying to escape her?

She stood still for a long moment, considering the Pillar of Eternity in her hand. That had to be the source of the problem. Either that or Cain was somehow more powerful than she had guessed. That couldn't be what was happening here.

The Pillar of Eternity did not want her to kill these demons.

"But why?" she said aloud. "They can't be redeemed. They will destroy us if we do not destroy them first."

The Pillar said nothing to her in response. Its touch remained cold in her hand.

Resisting the urge to throw it to the ground, she grunted and began marching away from the demons, towards her camp. Only when she was a safe distance away did she let the magic drop and stared back at the demons.

They remained where they were, completely ignoring the bodies of their comrades she had killed. Their eyes continued to follow her, an almost curious expression on their faces. She could almost see Cain's eyes reflected in theirs. Yes, he was watching her. What was he planning?

Without another word she returned to the camp, where people were already on the move. Skellig, mounted on one of their few horses, galloped closer to Jak as she approached.

"Did you learn anything?" she asked, marking the direction Jak was coming from.

"Nothing," Jak said. "They gave no indication of what Cain plans. I even killed some of them."

"How many?"

"A few dozen maybe, not enough to make a difference. Something...held me back. I can't explain it."

Skellig narrowed her eyes at Jak. She probably thought Jak's compassion was what held her back, not an actual force from the Pillar of Eternity. She would let her think that. Until Jak knew more about the Pillar of Eternity, she would not speculate when they needed to move.

"Well, just as long as you don't hold back if and when they attack," Skellig said, spurring her horse along. She pulled ahead but called back as she did so. "See if you can make your way to the front of the

procession. If anyone should be leading us, it should be you."

Then she galloped off ahead of Jak. She sighed and began moving at a trot towards the front. At least Skellig could have offered her a ride. She probably thought she could move faster with the Pillar of Eternity, which normally would be true. But given her recent experience, perhaps overusing the Relic wasn't a good idea.

She stared back at the demon army, surprised at the lack of visibility facing east. The sun had mostly set in the west, and they were left to travel in near darkness. Add to that the fact that the air was growing heavy around them.

Jak turned to glance northward, where she could barely see hints of the queen's army in the distance. Were they watching what was happening? Were they aware that all they wanted to do was to get away from the demons instead of work with them?

Something did not feel right about this whole situation. That much was crystal clear to Jak. She faced forward once again and continued her trot towards the front of their diverse yet minuscule army.

17

"The demons are following!" Elva came riding up on a horse, pulling it alongside Jak and Skellig at the front of the exodus. The entire group of several hundred Fae and humans followed in their wake, many of whom were now staring at Elva, shocked at the words that she had so foolishly blurted out.

Skellig cursed, both at the new information and probably at the way Elva delivered it. "I was afraid they would make a move."

"What do you mean, following?" asked Jak, keeping her voice lower as Elva swung herself off her horse.

"They're not attacking," said Elva, matching Jak's tone. "Just keeping roughly the same distance that they had before, but they are definitely moving, staying with us."

"And the queen's army?" interjected Skellig, "What are they doing?" "The Sightseers haven't reported anything, major." said Elva. "From what we can tell they're holding back."

"Hm, probably hoping the demons do their dirty work for them," said Skellig, nodding. "Thank you, Elva. Keep us informed."

Elva nodded and swung herself up on the horse again, riding back towards the rear.

"I should be back there," said Jak, regretting her decision to come to the front. "If the demons attack I'll be needed there."

"If the demons attack we'll all have more things to worry about," said Skellig. "Right now we need you to lead. The others will feel more confident if you're the one at the front, rather than just me."

"But you're a much better leader than I am," Jak protested. "You have more experience."

"Experience is important, but it is not the only quality in a leader. Let's not forget your incredible abilities. No one has seen that before, and it's inspiring."

Jak looked down at the road ahead, putting one foot in front of the other. "All circumstantial. I didn't ask for any of that."

"True, but you also have one inherent quality that all leaders need, but only the best ones have."

Jak glanced to the side. “What’s that?”

“You care,” Skellig smiled. “And the people can see it. The Fae can see it. I can see it.”

Jak let out a soft laugh. “Based on some of our past conversations, I would have thought that particular quality was more of a hindrance than a help.”

“Compassion very rarely makes tactical sense.” Skellig straightened as she walked. “But that does not mean it’s a quality leaders should ignore, even an old tactician like myself.” She paused and did not look at Jak for a while. Then, “I’m sorry about the other day, after those…trolls attacked, I rather lost my wits.”

“It’s okay, you had to ask the hard questions,” said Jak. “We couldn’t just make blind assumptions, and you kept us from doing that.”

Skellig turned her head and smiled at Jak. “See what I mean? You care about people, everyone. Not just the Fae, and not just your friends.”

Jak’s smile faltered. “I’m not sure that’s true. I don’t particularly care for the queen, or her priests.”

“The queen has made her own decisions, and those have been what condemned her. Trouble is, she’s also a very good tactician. I wish I knew what she was thinking.”

“Probably that the demons are in league with us, the way they’re following.”

“Of that I have no doubt. The question is, what will she do with that information?”

The sound of a man running toward them caused both to look to their right. Naem was running in their direction. Jak gripped her spear a little harder, though of course he wasn’t attacking. Why did she always have to be so on edge every time he came near?

“I’ve just come from the river,” he said as he approached.

“And?” Skellig didn’t even hesitate. For all of her reaction, you would have thought Naem was nothing more than another soldier in the army, doing his duty. Of course that was silly. Skellig knew that Naem was certainly more than that. For better or worse, Jak could not tell.

“The Water Fae that I brought have adjusted very well, but the river is narrowing and becoming rougher. They’re going to have a hard time soon.”

“Yes, well that’s just going to be the way it is,” Skellig said. “You still have those special wagons you brought with you, correct?”

“Yes…ah, sir!” said Naem. Jak rolled her eyes. There he went, trying to pretend nothing happened and to fit in. But they wouldn’t allow that. He would have to prove himself much more before…

“Good,” Skellig continued. “We will need those once the main river dissappears and we have to carry the Water Fae the rest of the way. We’ll have to consider which one we choose to follow.” Then more to herself, she added, “If only we weren’t so restrained by having to follow a water source.”

“Yes, sir,” said Naem. He glanced at Jak, but she looked away.

“You’ve proven a great help so far, Sergeant,” said Skellig. “Keep it up, and eventually we’ll welcome you back openly. But you’ll understand if right now we have bigger concerns to worry about.”

“Thank you, Major,” said Naem, a hint of relief in his voice. “I was afraid you’d think we were behind the demon army.”

“Oh, the idea came up, it was discussed,” said Skellig, glancing at Jak. “But we knew better. Continue as you were, and you’ll have no problem with *me*.” She emphasized that last word. Jak scrunched up her face and looked at Skellig. Was Skellig implying that *she* was the problem here?

“Understood, sir,” said Naem, throwing up a salute. Skellig returned it before Naem left to fall into ranks behind them, probably going to check up on others of his little group of refugees.

Jak and Skellig did not say anything to each other for a while after that. Instead, Jak focused on the path ahead of them. They were rounding one of the foothills now, coming very close to the narrow pass that led between two of the intersecting mountains. The road here was small, but not untraveled. It was one of three main paths to get through the south mountains, so merchants and lone travelers used it a lot to trade with the southern peoples. Though in all honesty, not much trade happened there, and most of it went through Tradehall, which was closer to one of the other mountain passes. This one was more out of the way, and they hadn’t even run into any merchants since arriving.

Jak stared up at the giant cliffs that loomed on either side of them. Their group was already slowing down, to make room for all of them to fit. Thankfully, there were only a few hundred of them, so they’d have an easier time of making it through than the queen’s army, or possibly even the demon army.

A rushing sound greeted Jak’s ears, as they came closer to the river. This gorge through the mountains had been made by the river, though there was still enough space for all of them to walk alongside it. Naem had been right, the waters were becoming pretty rough and shallow in places.

Jak scanned the river to find the Water Fae. She didn’t see them. They must still be nearer the back of the group. Maybe she should send a message for them to take the lead. That would give them plenty of time to get them out and onto the pitch-covered wagons if

they encountered an area of the river that they could not swim through.

A great 'BOOM' echoed ahead of her, and the ground rumbled beneath her feet. Instantly, Jak had both her spear ready in one hand, and the Pillar of Eternity brandished in the other. Shouts of alarm came from behind, but Jak's eyes were fixed forward.

Ahead of them was a giant troll, just like all the others she'd seen so far. No, this *was* one of the trolls she'd seen. It was missing an arm.

This was the troll that had attacked their camp earlier.

Skellig was yelling something to the others, and as many as could lined up beside Jak, readying weapons. Jak was only barely aware.

This was going to be tricky.

Giant footsteps rattled Jak's knees as more of the trolls lined up beside the first, some coming from behind rocks in their path, others jumping from higher up the cliffs, as the first had done. There were a half-dozen of them at least. Though as Jak narrowed her eyes, she could see even more coming from behind.

Yes, this was definitely going to be tricky.

Desperate, she scanned each one of them, looking for the one she had encountered in the ghost town of Riverbrook, but she couldn't see him. Would she even recognize him if he was here? They all looked like they were made of stone. But at least the one she knew was much larger than the others.

The one missing an arm bellowed, and the sound roared at them, amplified by the canyon walls.

It was angry. It remembered what they had done to it, and its companion.

Jak swallowed, bringing the Pillar of Eternity to bear, and all but letting her spear drop. None of their usual weapons were going to do any good against these things. Could anything be done?

"Skellig!" she yelled, spinning to find the major, who had left her side. The woman was behind her, herding forward, of all people, the gnomes.

The troll bellowed again and a rhythmic crunching indicated it was beginning to charge them.

"Let me try to talk to them!" she yelled at Skellig. "I got through to one before." She hadn't had a chance to tell the council about that. Perhaps that had been a mistake. Now everyone considered these trolls as monsters, when Jak knew that wasn't necessarily the case.

She didn't wait to hear Skellig's response. Instead, she spun back to face the advancing trolls. Now to find a way to get through to them without resorting to violence. The wind was picking up behind Jak, replacing the still humidity that had hung in the air before.

A storm was coming.

Jak called on her new well of power. The Telekinetic brand on her forehead blazed with light, illuminating the ground around her. She rose into the air. While she did so, she dropped her spear and lit a column of fire in that hand. Fire wouldn't do anything against these Fae, but it could put on an impressive show.

Indeed, the lead troll fixed its lightning eyes on her, and it slowed to a halt. This was something he hadn't seen. Some of the others did not see her at first, but as their leader slowed, they too got the idea. Eventually all of them were fixed on her, and surely the eyes of their entire army were watching her from behind as well. She held her flaming hand high, a beacon of light where she hung in the air.

"We're not here to hurt you!" she scanned the trolls, looking for the big one she had interacted with before. She still did not see him.

The lead troll snarled at her, and she was sure that had she not been suspended in mid air, it would have charged her.

She let the fire in her hand die. Best to show that they were not being aggressive.

"We're just trying to get away from the two armies behind us." She continued to speak in a loud voice. "There are demons behind us. They will hurt you if they can. Let us pass and you're welcome to join us."

She spared a quick glance down and slightly behind her. Skellig was watching, her eyes calculating, and her arm upraised as if ready to give a signal, or perhaps keeping everyone from attacking. The gnomes were doing something though. She didn't have enough time to get a close look.

With a roar, the lead troll picked up a bolder and threw it at Jak. Just in time, she called on her Telekinetic magic to move her to the side. She only just managed to do so. This magic was still very new to her. Yells echoed below her as the bolder continued its path and the others had to scramble out of its path.

"Please!" she yelled at the trolls. "We don't want…" but she dodged as yet another bolder came her way. The others, emboldened by their leader, were beginning to search the ground for something to throw as well. She flew in another direction. If diplomacy wouldn't work, perhaps she could draw off their attention and give the others a chance to move on. She flew up beyond the trolls to come to their other side, spinning around to face them and her own army beyond.

But holding the Telekinesis like this was beginning to wear on her. Instinctively she called on her Strength to continue powering her other magic. Yet she would need to come down eventually.

For once, something went right. The eyes of the trolls followed her, and they momentarily forgot about the others.

"Okay!" she shouted. "If you won't play nice, then come and get

me.”

18

It was working. They began stumbling back the way they came, drawn to her like moths to an isolated flame.

"Flamedancers!" Skellig called. Jak looked beyond the trolls to see what Skellig was doing. She knew fire would do almost nothing against these things.

But that was when she finally got a glimpse of what the gnomes were doing. With their enate magic of heat, they were touching the sides of the canyon and the giant boulders and outcroppings in the side of the mountain, even the very dirt beneath their feet. And it was all beginning to melt away.

Of course. Jak finally realized Skellig's strategy. The woman was brilliant! Flamedancers could manipulate molten rock to some degree. Once the gnomes had created enough of it, they could use it as a weapon. Hopefully it was more effective against these trolls than flames alone. But of course, this was all a worst-case scenario. If Jak wanted any chance of reasoning with these trolls, she had to get to them before they resorted to violence. Perhaps if she…

In her momentary distraction, a flying boulder clipped the edge of her shoulder. With a cry, she lost her concentration and fell several feet to the ground. She hit with a jolt that rocked through every bone in her body. Why hadn't she given herself Toughness before now? Were any bones broken?

She rose to her feet, able to do that much at least. But the Pillar of Eternity had dropped from her hand.

Bellows from the oncoming trolls drove her panic as she scanned the ground around her. There! The Pillar of Eternity had fallen about ten feet away. In a frantic effort, she scrambled towards the Relic.

The lead troll was almost on her, she could tell from the rumble of its footsteps. With a final lunge, she threw herself forward whilst simultaneously reaching out with Telekinesis for the staff. They flew through the air towards one another until at last her fingers closed on its cool, polished shaft, just as her body connected with the ground.

In an instant, she summoned its magic and all sound ceased.

Taking a deep breath, then another, she rose to her feet and turned. The lead troll had its one arm out, reaching for her. Its fingers were mere inches from her body.

She swallowed and instinctively took several steps backward. That had been too close. But with the magic of the Pillar of Eternity, she was now the only hope of eliminating this threat.

Someone had to ask the hard questions. That's what she'd said to Skellig.

Could she let these Fae live if they would destroy the others? Was there no other way?

Keeping the Pillar in hand, she stepped forward, reaching her free arm till it was merely inches away from the one remaining arm of the troll, who still hung suspended in the air. All she would have to do is give it one solid tug, and with the magic of the Pillar, it would come flying off. She could tear these trolls apart if she needed to.

Yet a familiar nausea began building up in her stomach. Not as sudden this time, but it was there. A warning that what she was considering would not be in line with the purpose of the Pillar's magic. It would not be right.

But was it right to let them slaughter the rest of her party? Or was there another way? Yes, there had to be.

She backed up until she was a good distance away from the troll, then let her magic drop. The troll stumbled forward, the quarry he had been reaching for suddenly gone.

"Hey!" she shouted. Its head spun to face her. Its eyes narrowed in confusion. To the troll's perspective, she had just disappeared then reappeared where she now stood. "Come and get me."

It roared and came at her once more, the other trolls following in its wake. Jak stayed exactly where she was, until it was almost on top of her. Then she summoned the magic of time once more and the troll stopped midstep. She ran back even further, before dropping the magic and letting the process repeat itself.

And it worked. The troll grew increasingly enraged, stamping on the ground and slamming the canyon wall with its arm.

But some of the others were beginning to lose interest in her. She was, after all, just one small human. There were plenty of others that interested them more. One by one, those in the back of the group began to turn away.

In a last effort, Jak summoned the magic to freeze time and run up to those who were peeling off from the group. Her sudden appearance right beside them threw many of them off, but when she just disappeared after they swiped at her, their interest seemed to wane. These were smarter than the one-armed troll. They weren't allowing themselves to become frustrated just because they couldn't catch her.

Or maybe they just didn't care.

Well, it had been worth a shot. Jak summoned her Telekinesis and rose into the air once more. The gnomes had prepared a lot more molten rock by this point, and Skellig and the other Flamedancers were already forming it into a barrier against the trolls. One of the giant Fae smashed into the molten wall, screaming as he did so. Jak winced. It would seem the fiery rock had some effect after all.

Water suddenly zoomed through the air and crashed on top of the bellowing troll. Steam hissed and clouded the area. When it dispersed, the troll remained locked under the now hardened stone. It struggled, roared, but everything below its neck remained still. It was trapped.

Skellig wasn't trying to kill the trolls using the molten rock, she was trying to confine them.

Jak found the major among the other Flamedancers, lifting her hands as she tried to guide another tendril of molten lava towards one of the other trolls. Had this been her plan all along? When had she gone from wanting to kill the trolls, to this?

Some of the trolls were beginning to catch on. They avoided the warm light of the molten stone and began circling the group of Flamedancers cautiously. Other soldiers in the back raised their spears, readying themselves.

She had to keep the trolls distracted, give the others a chance to capture them.

Jak lifted herself into the air once again. "Hey!" she yelled. "Which one of you is the one I met in Riverbrook not far from here."

She didn't really expect an answer. All she needed was something to shout at them to get their attention. She was surprised, therefore, at how well the distraction worked. The trolls all turned to stare at her, their eyes glowing purple in the night. Even the one-armed troll paused momentarily. Had they understood her? She knew they were capable of understanding speech. At least the other one had.

"Keep it up, Jak!" she heard Skellig say in a strained voice.

"Ah...yes, that's right." Jak continued in a loud voice. "I met one of you in Riverbrook and we didn't fight. Is he with you? Big guy."

The one-armed troll roared, and went to pick up a bolder. Jak tensed. But she had given the Flamedancers enough time to work. Collectively they threw a sheet of hot lava onto several of the closest trolls. The leader jumped out of range just in time, but many of the others were not so lucky. A wave of water from the river was the second to fall, guided by the Water Fae not far away.

The one-armed troll bashed his arm on the ground and stamped his feet. He was not happy. From a safer distance away from the Flamedancers, he picked up a stone and hurled it at them. Not at Jak this time.

“No!” She readied herself to catch the thing with Telekinesis, but she couldn’t do so while still holding herself aloft.

She fell out of the sky, barely managing to catch the boulder as it flew. With a dull thud that knocked the wind out of her, she fell to the ground for the second time that night. Okay, maybe flying wasn’t the best idea after all.

With most of the trolls temporarily subdued, she took in the rest of her group surrounding her. Most were on their guard. But some were sparing nervous glances behind them, as if worried that more trolls might sneak up on them from…

Wait, they weren’t worried about the trolls. They had remembered what Jak had momentarily forgotten. The demon army on their rear.

Forgetting her recent fall, she rose into the air one last time, this time looking behind their group to see what the demons were up to. Surely they realized that their group was no longer moving? Would they attack now that their group was beset from both sides?

There they stood, not far off, standing still for now. That was a relief. But as Jak squinted, something did not look quite right. Many of the demons were not even turned in their direction, they were facing away north. Towards...

“Skellig, hold the line here,” she said, and zoomed through the air towards the back of their procession. It was a little difficult to fly like this, but it was faster than running. If it didn’t require so much of her concentration this would be a great way to get around.

She made it to the back, finding Elva and a group of others who stood guarding their rear flank. Jak surveyed the demons who still lay several hundred yards away. There was no doubt about it. They were facing away from them now.

“Which of you is a Sightseer,” said Jak as she landed. Elva didn’t speak, wide-eyed at seeing her hero fly in like that.

One of the young Watchers raised his hand, tentatively. “I am….whoa!”

Jak grabbed him with Telekinesis and raised him into the air. He struggled but eventually realized what was going on. “What do you see?” Jak asked him, making sure he was facing the right direction. “What are the demons looking at?”

The Sightseer peered in the distance. After a moment, he swore under his breath.

“What is it?” said Jak, though she had a suspicion.

“The queen’s army is advancing,” said the Sightseer. “They’re moving fast. At this rate they will reach us within the hour.”

19

"Skellig!" Jak flew back to the front of the line. The gnomes, together with the Flamedancers and Water Fae had managed to build up a small barrier, keeping those of the trolls that they had not captured away from the rest of their army.

The major was there at the forefront, but she turned when Jak called to her.

"The queen is attacking," Jak said as she landed. "She probably realized that we're temporarily trapped."

"Broken brands," Skellig snarled. "So they'll attack the demons first, and then…"

"And then us. You know she has enough troops to make short work of those demons. And probably us too."

"What about the Pillar of Eternity?" said Skellig, pausing to raise a spout of flaming rock to cover up a portion of their barrier that a troll was trying to cross.

"I can't use it to kill anyone," said Jak. "I tried that, and it wouldn't even let me kill demons. And I can't use it indefinitely. I can hold them back for a short time, but that's about it."

"Jak, I know what you're going to say."

"We have to help them, Skellig. Fighting the demons without our help will result in more casualties. And perhaps it will convince them that we're on their side."

"We know the queen won't see it that way. She'll find a way to spin it. She'll say we were just trying to deceive them further."

"But that doesn't mean we should let the demons kill more of them, when we are in a position to help."

"Jak, I don't know if you've noticed, but we're not exactly free to help at the moment. I need people here."

"Let me take everyone but the gnomes and Flamedancers then. The demons aren't even looking this way. Cain isn't expecting us to attack."

"What makes you think that?"

"Because it's not what he would do. He would let the queen's army

die fighting the demons."

Skellig sighed. "You'll have to lead. I'm needed here."

Jak nodded. "Very well."

She turned, and faced everyone behind her. A plethora of eyes stared back at her, of all shapes and sizes. There were the glowing green of the Shadow Fae, the bright yellow of the Bright Fae, the earthy brown of the dwarves, and of course many eyes that belonged to humans. There were frightened eyes, courageous eyes, angry eyes.

"I need everyone except the gnomes, Water Fae, and Flamedancers to follow me. The queen will soon be here, and we need to prove to her that the demons are not on our side. We need to prove to them that we will fight for their needs as well as ours."

She saw a few heads nod to this, though some still looked troubled. Well, she wasn't exactly one for speeches.

"Skellig will remain here with the rest and hold off this attack. Now I know it can feel intimidating, with these trolls on one side, and demons on the other. But if we play our cards right, we can make an ally of the queen's army."

She had to convince them of that much, even if Jak wasn't so sure herself. She had to convince them that the queen wouldn't attack them too if they helped eliminate the demons.

Without waiting to see if everyone agreed with her, she rose into the air once more. Yeah, using her powers this way wasn't practical, but it sure made a visual impression.

"Forward!" she shouted, and zoomed back to the rear of their army. As she flew, she summoned her spear to her hand, the Pillar of Eternity still clutched in the other. Perhaps the magic wouldn't let her kill demons using its power, but she could still kill them without it.

She flew right past where Elva and the Sightseers stood, and the wind rushed through her face and hair, blowing it back behind her.

The tip of her spear met the first unfortunate demon as Jak let go of her magic and fell, this time gracefully, to the ground. In a move that would have made Naem proud, she wrenched the spear out in one fluid motion and readied it for the next demon.

By now the demons were noticing what was happening. Collectively, those nearest Jak turned to face her. No, they were looking behind her.

The entire company of the Fae and humans were sprinting at the demons with weapons raised. They were following her lead.

Somewhere, perhaps not far, but perhaps on the other side of the world, Cain must have given an order to his army. They attacked.

The nearest demon snarled as its hind legs shot out, hurtling towards Jak. She watched it come for her, as if in slow motion. Its gray skin glistened in the night, and its broken brands flickered as

they tried to work properly, but failed. It was that failed branding that turned this human into the demon it was. Though in fact, it wasn't a failed branding. It was an intentional failure. One designed to create demons. So many demons.

Jak brought her spear up to meet the creature, and it impaled itself on its tip. But the next demon was not far behind. This was the main strategy of demons. Overwhelm.

Just in time, Jak brought her spear to bear on the second demon, then the third. But they were all closing in on her now. Summoning her Flamedancer magic, she sent a wave of it rushing into the demons on all sides. Human screams reached her ears as the demons' flesh caught fire. With that, she summoned a different magic. Her Flamedancer brand winked out and the Telekinesis brand on her forehead blazed to life. She pushed and the burning demons around her flew backwards into their comrades. More yelps and screams surrounded her as the flames brushed up against other demons.

Cheers and yells sounded just behind her as her army finally caught up. The clink of armor and weapons heralded their arrival, but Jak did not turn to look. She focused on the demons in front of her, and sent more fire hurtling their way.

She still held the Pillar of Eternity in her hand, using it as a club when needed, but ignoring its power for now. It would resist her attempts to use it for killing. That was not what it was built for. Would it resent the killing she was doing now, even without its power? Or did it understand that sometimes killing was necessary, just as she had learned since leaving Riverbrook? Did it understand that demons, in almost every sense, were already dead?

Well it wasn't stopping her now, as her spear and magic sent dozens, no, hundreds of demons to their final fate. Flames coursed out of both arms, down the shafts of her spear and the Pillar of Eternity, and into the onslaught of wretched humans-turned-demons.

They screamed and did their best to leap out of the way, but many were not so fortunate. The scraps of clothing that they still wore caught fire. And there was nothing most of them could do about it.

She pushed forward. She had to stay at the forefront of the battle, or she would risk harming her fellow soldiers with her flames. If that happened, she'd have to resort to more conventional means of battle.

Just then a demon caught her off guard as it barreled into her from behind. She fell to the ground, spinning as she did so, bringing the Pillar of Eternity to bear.

The demon's jaws caught on the polished black surface of the Pillar. Its teeth did nothing to harm it, though it tried, biting and gnashing its teeth. Jak grabbed it with Telekinesis and was about to fling it away when more demons, sensing their moment, crowded in

on her. Fire shot out of her fingertips and engulfed them, but their momentum carried them forward anyway.

She had to get away.

Summoning as much strength as possible, both her own and that of her Strength brand, she activated Telekinesis, getting ready to push.

A demon bit her shoulder.

Jak lost all control over her magic in that instant, crying out as pain shot through her.

The demons moved in for the kill.

A spear cut through two of the demons nearest Jak, not her own spear. A form threw itself at the creatures, wrenching many of them away from Jak, and giving her just a moment more to live.

It was all the time Jak needed. Ignoring the white-hot burning in her shoulder, she pushed at the demons around her. They went flying in every direction, giving Jak time to see who it was that had saved her.

Elva struggled against the demons. She was holding one off with her spear, but more were snapping at her, getting ready to lunge. Elva was no warrior, not like Naem or the Watchers. But the woman was not holding back. She swung her spear at the demons, trying to keep them from getting too close. It wouldn't work for long.

Then more arrived. Shadow Fae were there, their black knifes held fast in each hand. Spinning and slashing, they cut through the demons one by one. Yewin also pushed forward, and as demons moved in to attack, he would grab each one and their eyes would burn out before they collapsed to the ground. The effect was almost like Blood-burning, but the process was likely different somehow. There was still so much they didn't know about Fae abilities.

But even with all of that, it was not enough. Despite Jak's prowess and that of the Shadow Fae, they were only several hundred, and the demons numbered in the thousands. They could not keep this up forever.

Lightning flashed overhead. Jak looked up, momentarily distracted. Thick, angry clouds rolled overhead. The storm had moved in extremely fast. Or had they been fighting for longer than Jak remembered? Time did seem to have no meaning in battle. A few droplets of rain landed on her nose. Hopefully the rain wouldn't make it harder to fight.

A cry sounded not far from her, and Jak spun as one Shadow Fae went down, overwhelmed by demons. Cursing herself, she raised her spear. She couldn't worry about the weather now. One by one, the demons would pick them off until none were left. They had to do something more, something dramatic.

Yet one question nagged the back of her mind. After all this

excitement, what was the queen doing?

Pausing, she activated Telekinesis and rose several feet to get a good look. It was hard to see in the dark, though another flash of lightning illuminated the distant army. It was still afar off. Did they know they had been the cause of all this? That in forming up for attack they had forced Jak's hand, and that of the Fae? Hopefully the queen would see what they were doing and be open to the idea that…

A massive hand grabbed her leg and pulled it down. Startled, her magic faded and she fell, hard.

Not pausing for an instant, she spun to see a massive shape behind her, so dark Jak could not get a good look. But two eyes, the same color of the lightning that flashed overhead, stared back at her, and tiny flashes of the same energy seemed to leap from parts of its body to the other. It was one of the trolls, the new type of Fae. Had Skellig failed to hold them off at the pass?

But the troll made no move to hurt her, and something about it seemed different. It was large, larger than most of the others she'd seen, except…

"You're the one from Riverbrook!" she exclaimed, her voice lost in the chaos of battle.

It said nothing, but stood resolute like a stone. Jak stood, just as a demon came flying at them. The troll reached out one rocky arm, and swatted the demon like a fly. It soared through the air, landing nearly thirty feet away, and did not get back up.

Though most were still preoccupied with the demon onslaught, some of the Shadow Fae, Watchers, and Bright Fae were facing the newcomer. They readied their weapons.

"Stop!" Jak yelled over the noise. "He's here to help."

That would have to be enough for everyone, because more demons were closing in on them, and Jak saw a Watcher near the front line go down. Elva was there, still miraculously alive, taking out as many demons as she could reach.

Placing her back to the troll, Jak readied herself to charge at the demons once more. She took one step forward.

The rocky hand of the troll grabbed her by the shoulder. A stab of pain shot through where the demon bit her. What was the troll doing?

She struggled, but another hand closed on her other shoulder and arm, locking her in place so that she could not break free.

"Stop!" she shouted. Was the troll really going to betray her like this? After all they had seen and done together in Riverbrook. After the sheep, and the removal of her block, and…

Something rushed into her, faster than the fastest river, and brighter than the strongest flash of lightning. It was all consuming, all surrounding, and it was filling her till she thought she might burst.

It was power, raw, overwhelming strength. This was something on a level she had never before experienced. Though a distant part of her recognized it.

The troll was linking with her.

20

Even without the power of the Pillar of Eternity, time slowed around her. While this link did not contain the same sort of awareness that she'd felt while linking to Yewin, or to the gnomes and dwarves, it did bear some similarities. She couldn't understand truth as she could when linked to Yewin, and she did not have the same connection to the Earth that she'd had with the gnomes and dwarves, but energy crackled around her. She saw the power contained in people, beings of light. Especially the troll, who shone like a beacon of power behind her. Nothing else compared to him.

Except perhaps the storm. Angry clouds churned out rain above them, but lightning flashed in frequent, irregular intervals. What struck Jak then was the realization that the power she felt in the heavens was the same power infused in living beings, though at a much greater degree. It was like the storm itself was alive. This was what the trolls embodied, their element. It was the power innate in nature and all living things.

The cry of a fallen Watcher brought her back to reality. If she didn't do something about their immediate situation, people would die, and their energy would return to the earth itself. She had to stop that from happening.

Feeling the massive well of power guiding her, she raised both hands high, pointing her spear and the Pillar of Eternity at the wall of demons. Flames erupted from her hands, down the shafts in her hands, and directly at the monstrosities. These flames could not be compared to the puny sparks she had conjured before. Her magic had been a candle in comparison to what she now wielded. The power coursed through her, threatening to consume her, yet leaving her untouched at the same time. It shot from her fists, burning the demons to a crisp in an instant.

One of the Shadow Fae ventured too close to her flames. Though the fire did not touch him, the searing heat of her enhanced flames was enough. His tunic caught fire and he yelped as his skin seared.

Instantly, Jak let the flames die. Flamedancing would not be

effective here, and she couldn't get to the front of the line. Too many of her soldiers and Fae were already among them. She had to find another way. But what could she do? Flamedancing was her best offensive brand against demons. Perhaps she could flatten the demons with Telekinesis, but at that scale she wouldn't be able to distinguish between friend and foe. She might kill someone on her side. Perhaps if she had some other form of branding, she could...

"Yewin!" she shouted on a sudden burst of inspiration. "I need you." The Bright Fae was not far from her. He turned at her call, black demon blood staining his face.

Yewin hesitated only a moment, before running to her side, twisting to avoid a pair of demons that leapt at him. Jak eliminated both of those demons with a white-hot bar of fire that she shot out of one finger. This kind of power was definitely something she could get used to.

"What is it, Jak," he panted as he neared. "Do you need help?" He glanced sideways at the enormous troll that still held Jak in its grip.

"No, he's fine, he's helping. I need you to link with me."

Yewin met her eyes. He knew the dangers of linking. It had nearly killed him twice before. But he also knew that she knew these dangers too. Jak could see it in his eyes. He knew she wouldn't ask it of him if it weren't important.

Reaching out, he grasped her hand.

And a whole new world of awareness rushed into her.

She welcomed the familiar embrace of truth. In moments like these, everything made sense, and she was at peace. Her destiny lay before her, and it was good. There was no hesitation, no self-doubt. Though there was still sorrow. If only she could hang onto this vast well of truth and light, but every time after ending the link, the knowledge would leave as well. But she could not worry about that now.

In that instant, her suspicions were confirmed. She could feel the energy that surrounded all living things swiftly drain from Yewin. This was what almost killed him, and what killed many of the gnomes and dwarves in Mt. Harafast. The link syphoned away all the energy that each participating Fae contained.

Unless that being was the embodiment of energy.

Mentally, she felt again at the link between her and the troll. It was not draining of energy. It received its power from the very ground beneath them, and from the storm above. It was, itself, a source of energy. And if she could channel some of that…

In a rush of intuition, guided by the knowledge gleaned from Yewin's link, she took some of that power and channeled it into Yewin. The Bright Fae's face grew brighter, and he gasped in shock as

his physical strength returned. He stared at her, dumbfounded, but he did not break the link.

Jak had one more task to complete before she finished her job here. Though the very air seemed to glow around her from all the power she channeled, she activated a relatively small gift. The magic was, by comparison, insignificant, and yet it had become her most important ability above all.

Her Gifter brand blazed with a white light and she grabbed her opposing arm, willing another brand to become part of her flesh. She did not even notice the pain as a perfect Thunder brand etched itself into her right arm. This was not a brand she had practiced, but she knew the theory, and her link with Yewin provided her with the knowledge which she did not yet possess.

When she was finished, the Gifter brand faded and she was left with yet another offensive brand. She had almost all of them now. What had she become?

The troll still held the link, but Jak could not count on him doing so forever. She had to finish what she started. A new well of power filled her, not unlike the power she felt coming from the troll itself, and from the world around her. Perhaps Thunder was a far more important brand than anyone had realized. It provided control over that which gives life.

But she would have to think about that later. Instead, she reached out with that newfound well and connected with the energy crackling all around them. Thunder rattled across the plains as lightning illuminated the ongoing battle.

The time to forge the link had cost them. A demon came hurtling out of the darkness, straight at Yewin. Caught up as she was in the larger view of the battlefield, Jak missed it until the very last second. The jaws of the demon opened wide as it prepared to close them around Yewin's throat. "No!" Jak called out in a voice that echoed with a power she did not recognize. All that power rushing through her and for that one moment, she could not bring it to bear in time. It was like trying to guide a river through the eye of a needle.

Elva lunged in front of the demon, catching its body with her own and preventing it from killing Yewin. They fell, and the impact snapped Elva's spear in two. She rolled to the side, and the demon wasted no time in changing its plan of attack. It slashed at Elva, and Jak's eyes widened as the claws met their mark on Elva's neck and face. Elva choked and blood burst from her lips, but her arm was already raised with the sharp half of her spear in hand. It cut into the demon, who screamed and collapsed on the dying woman.

Jak could do nothing. Yewin and the troll still clung to her, rendering her immobile. She screamed, as rage filled her. Rage at

seeing Elva's death, but more importantly rage at the knowledge that she could have done nothing to stop it, that she had not been meant to stop it. It was Elva's sacrifice to make, and it had been her time. That knowledge, gained through the link with Yewin, was what angered her most. Well, fate would not stop her from what she had to do next.

With the troll's link fueling her, and Yewin's link guiding her, Jak called on the power in the heavens and struck. A bolt of lightning flew down from the clouds and connected in an instant with one of the demons. It did not even cry out, but fell over dead.

She called another bolt of lightning, then another. But her link with the troll allowed her to do far more. She called down as much of the crackling energy as she could muster, until the entire field and nearby mountainside were in a constant state of flickering illumination. This truly was power beyond anything Jak had ever controlled. It was exhilarating.

Demons died by the dozens every second. Shadow Fae, dwarves, humans, and others on the battlefield let their weapons drop to their sides. Because their valiant service was no longer needed. The demons they had fought mere moments before lay dead at their feet.

Jak drew on more of the lightning, reaching out further to attack all of the demons that still lay some distance away. Some tried to run, but there was no place they could hide from her. Not only could the lightning find them, but her connection to Yewin provided her with all the knowledge she needed to target each one, distinguishing between friend and foe.

With this much magic, she could do anything, she could kill every enemy, stop any threat. Perhaps she could even level the mountainside if she wanted to. Anything was possible, perhaps even…

She brought her attention closer, to the body of Elva in front of her. That energy that filled all living beings was no longer in her. Perhaps Jak could change that.

She summoned a bolt of lightning, guiding it straight into the lifeless body of Elva. The body convulsed, and more blood spurted from the woman's wounds. When the lightning faded, her body relaxed and lay motionless, the energy once again gone. She needed another dose.

Again, Jak summoned another lightning bolt, which lit into Elva's lifeless form. Again, and again.

"Jak!" Yewin's voice brought her crashing back to reality. His golden eyes pleaded with her. "You can't do this. This is one thing beyond your reach."

The Bright Fae spoke the truth, as was his nature. And Jak knew it. She knew it in her heart, and from the knowledge gained from the link. Tears stung her eyes, and she stared at Elva's corpse. Smoke rose

from her extremities and armor. The lightning would not bring her back.

White-hot fury filled her.

She turned that fury outward, searching for something to blame. Her mind came to rest on the queen's army. It was close, and advancing throughout the entire battle, ready to pounce upon whoever proved the victor. They would be there within half an hour at least. Should she do something to stop them? She could. The ability to wipe them all out lay within her grasp. No one could fight her like this. Not even Cain could stand up to her. She could eliminate the queen once and for all, she could take over the kingdom, make things the way they should be.

No, a voice seemed to whisper to her. Was it her own voice, or that of another? It seemed to come from the link itself, and had a familiar quality to it. Soothing. Like when her father told her stories before falling asleep. *That would make you no better than the queen*.

And the voice was right. As if in a rush, all the anger drained from her, replaced by pure sorrow. There were some things that she could not...should not change. She would find another way.

Turning her attention away from the queen's army, she focused once more on the demons. This threat, at least, she knew she could eliminate.

With one final surge of power, she called on every ounce of energy still present in the storm. It came crashing down on the remaining demons, though not a soul of her own army was harmed. All of the grasslands and the sides of the southern mountains lit up like midday.

Then all at once, the area plunged into darkness. Had Jak not known better, she would have thought she was using the Pillar of Eternity again, for all the silence that greeted her. The only sound was the falling of rain. No more lightning graced the sky. Very little energy even remained.

Perhaps sensing that his work was over, the giant troll released her from its grip and the link, as did Yewin. The Bright Fae's golden eyes were wide.

Jak swallowed, only truly aware of the power she had just wielded now that it was gone from her. She took several deep breaths and leaned on the rocky arm of the troll for support.

Everyone was staring straight at her. Not only those in her immediate vicinity, but everyone she could see. The entire army looked to her. Even the Flamedancers, gnomes and Water Fae that had stayed behind with Skellig were likely staring at the spectacle that she had just presented. Everyone within a hundred miles had probably seen something.

A few of them, the humans that followed Seph, began kneeling.

Some of the Watchers did as well. The Shadow Fae remained standing, they knew her more intimately to revere her in the same way, but many looked to her in awe.

Jak let her head drop to see the dead corpses of those who had fallen fighting the demons. Closest to her lay Elva, her face bloodied and broken, but her expression one of peace. Why did that trouble her so? Elva had given her life willingly to protect Jak and to protect Yewin. She would be honored for that. But ultimately it was her devotion to Jak, to the promise of Illadar, that she had given her life. What a terrible weight that was, to have the burden of prophecy and the lives of hundreds, perhaps eventually thousands, rest on her shoulders. It was not a burden she wanted, but it was a burden she would carry. Like Elva, she would carry it until it killed her. She must.

Jak knelt and closed Elva's blank, staring eyes. Then she wept. All stood around her, watching their savior cry over the loss of their dead. As rain washed away their own blood and tears.

21

Jak stood. She could not remain here and mourn too much. The battle was not over. There were still the trolls to deal with, not to mention the queen's army. A glance in that direction told her that they were nearly here. Would they attack now that the demon army had been pacified?

"You're all needed at the pass," she choked through her tears, letting her eyes survey the warriors around her. She stopped when she met those electrifying eyes of the troll. Her next words were for him. "We need your help to stop your brothers. They would kill us if they had the chance."

The troll stood tall, and nodded slightly. It was ready to follow her.

"Good," she said. Then she turned and began at a slow trot back to the opening of the mountain pass. The clink of armor and weapons, and the great, shuddering booms of troll footsteps told her that others were following. She increased her pace to a run, not wishing to call on her magic for aid. All of that magic was almost too much to handle, and that was a realization she had never made before. Would it be enough power to corrupt her? Would she just become another tyrant? In those moments when she held that power, she had felt like a goddess. She could have done anything. But not everything. Once all of this was over, hopefully she could take a long break from using her powers, give herself a chance to think.

But it had felt so good.

That thought haunted her until she reached the foothills. It had taken far longer now that she was on foot instead of flying through the air. But her followers were right on her heels.

If Skellig and the others had paid them any attention, they were not doing so now.

A mountain of rock greeted them, almost covering up the mountain pass entirely, well above Jak's head, and stretching sometimes as high as thirty feet in places. Trolls were partially submerged in the wall, left that way after the molten rock had hardened. Growles and inhuman shouts came from their rocky

mouths.

A ditch lay in front of the wall, where the gnomes had drawn the molten material used to create the wall. They were still at it now, using their innate Fae magic to melt stone, which the Flamedancers then took to pile up on top of the wall. Steam still hissed as the Water Fae then directed wave after wave on the burning rock, turning it into hard stone.

They were holding off the trolls, but it was barely enough, and from the look of things, it would not hold them for long. The Flamedancers and gnomes all had sweat streaming down their faces, not only from the heat but from exertion. Skellig stood at the center, her arms raised as she directed a tendril of molten lava at a struggling troll that was beginning to break free of his stone prison. They would not win this fight. Sooner or later, the trolls would break free and they would not have the strength to continue patching the lava that held them.

And from the pounding that radiated through the stone wall, not all of the trolls were contained in the hardened lava. Some of them must have remained on the opposite side, and were doing their best to smash at the wall to bring it down. It was all Skellig and the others could do to reinforce it.

Had they even realized that the fight with the demons was over? They must have seen the lightning.

Jak took a step forward to help the other Flamedancers. Maybe her added strength could give them the edge they needed to patch the wall into something not even the trolls could get through. But no, that would ultimately prove fruitless. They needed the trolls on their side. And besides, they had to get through the mountain pass one way or another, otherwise the queen would have them trapped where they were. They'd have nowhere to run.

Suddenly Skellig spun, realizing that a troll stood behind them, a huge troll.

"Behind you!" she yelled at the others. Already exhausted, the faces of humans and Fae alike paled when they saw the troll that stood behind Jak. The troll did not react like the others. He merely surveyed the view in front of him. His eyes moving from humans, to Fae, to his fellow trolls trapped in the stone wall. Those eyes narrowed slightly, but he did not move.

"It's okay." Jak put out her arms to stop Skellig and the others from attacking. "This one's with us."

Skellig eyed the troll warily, but did nothing at Jak's request. Jak turned to face the enormous Fae behind her. "We don't want to hurt any of the others, but they're trying to hurt us. Can you help?"

The troll's head looked from one troll to another. Many of them

had stopped bellowing once they saw their companion, though the sounds of banging against the back of the wall still continued. Rock chips fell from its summit, and small cracks appeared in the center.

"Please," Jak said to the large troll again as he continued not to react. "We all need to work together on this. Like you did when we linked. If you could somehow talk to…"

She cut off as a roar nearly deafened her. She spun to see a troll climbing over the lip of the rocky wall. While the gnomes and Flamedancers had been distracted, they hadn't watched the advancing creatures. The troll rose at the edge of the wall and beat its chest with one arm. Its only arm.

It was the leader of the trolls, the one who seemed to hate their little group so much.

It leapt and its feet hit the ground with an enormous crunch. Gnomes scattered out of the way as it swept its one arm at them.

Then its eyes found Jak.

Ignoring Skellig and the Flamedancers, it broke into a run, lowering its head and shoulder, making a bee-line for Jak's position.

Jak summoned her magic, ready to take the thing head-on. Thunder had worked against these creatures before, she could use it now. She activated her newest brand, prepping it to take care of this troll once and for all if she had to. The last thing she wanted was to kill a Fae, even an aggressive one. But sometimes life didn't give you much choice. She had just found that out the hard way.

Her fingers glowed with an electric light as she called the energy around her.

Then the large troll lunged at his one-armed brother.

The impact as the two of them fell to the ground nearly caused Jak's knees to buckle. The larger of the two remained on top, and swung a rocky fist at the other. It connected with a noise like the thunderclaps Jak had summoned just minutes before. Everyone dove out of the way to give the two trolls some space.

The one-armed creature fought back. He kicked at the larger troll, which knocked him off. They both rose to their feet, pausing to consider the threat the other posed. Then the one-armed troll lunged at the other. It bellowed in that gravelly voice that seemed to fill the entire mountainside. The larger of the two did not respond, but waited tense for the other to arrive. They collided with another ear-shattering crunch, but the larger of the two managed to hold his ground from pure mass alone. One-arm was big, and he was angry, but he was no match for a peer who was not only larger, but had the use of both his arms. He held his companion in place, though the latter struggled hard.

Then the larger troll said something. It was almost

indistinguishable from an animal roar, but she could sense structure in those words. The troll was trying to communicate something to the other.

The eyes of One-arm flashed. It understood, but it did not like what it heard. It roared at his larger brother that held it in its grip, struggled, and managed to free one of its legs. It kicked at the troll and the creature's knee buckled under the attack.

One-arm was on him in a flash, bringing its good arm down over and over again at the other's head. The troll from Riverbrook protected itself with both arms, though it was temporarily at a disadvantage.

The other trolls remained suspended in the stone wall, but none tried to escape. They all stood as transfixed as the rest of them, watching their leader and this other of their number fight it out. Jak had a feeling that their ultimate allegiance would depend a lot on who won.

Should she interfere? She could easily send a small bolt of lightning at the aggressor, causing him to freeze up and give her troll the advantage.

A hand gripped her shoulder, and she turned to see Gabriel there. Where had he been this whole time? Had he stayed here with Skellig and the others, or had he fought against the demons? He shook his head at her, as if knowing what she had been considering. "This has to be a fair fight between them," he said, nodding at the trolls.

Jak nodded. He was correct, of course. If she wanted any chance of bringing the trolls to her side, she could not interfere. This had to be done.

She turned her attention back to the battle. The large troll had recovered, ripping off a loose chunk of the wall and slamming it into the one-armed troll's head. It connected and shattered into a million loose pieces. Jak covered her face to keep stray bits from hitting her.

The big troll roared, again trying to communicate something to his comrade. But the enemy troll merely shook its head, either as an answer or to recover from the recent blow, before launching itself once more at its larger opponent. The giant Fae caught his companion in its arms as it tried to knock him over, his feet sliding a bit on the stone ground. Jak caught a glimpse of its eyes. They were...sad.

With a ripping sound that made Jak flinch, the larger troll tore the one remaining arm off of his companion. The smaller troll bellowed in agony, and dropped to its knees. One-arm continued to scream in that earthy roar, before its enemy gave it one last, massive blow to the head. Its screams cut off, and it fell to the ground with a thud that shook the ground around them.

All was silent for half a second, before the larger of the trolls

roared into the night air. It was not one of triumph, it was one of despair. It had just become the first Fae to kill another of its kind.

Its eyes turned to consider its brothers still trapped in the stone wall. Then it spoke in a loud, bellowing voice. Jak could almost understand the words that it said, though its voice was so different from that of a human, that she couldn't really make it out. The other trolls seemed to understand though. They responded in equally loud, but somewhat less aggressive tones. They were submitting themselves to their new leader.

"I...I think we won't have to worry about them anymore," Jak said, feeling out of breath though she hadn't done anything to personally participate in the recent battle.

Skellig glanced at her and swallowed. "I hope you're right. Because if that one wanted, he could probably devastate this company."

"I never got a chance to tell you, but I met this one in Riverbrook. We formed a connection of some kind. I don't think he will hurt us. Not as long as we do nothing to provoke it."

Ignoring their conversation, the giant Fae smashed one shoulder into the rocky barrier the gnomes, Water Fae, and Flamedancers had erected. It shuddered and buckled under his massive form. Again, the troll rammed itself into the wall, and again. Finally, it broke under his pounding. Jak and the others took a few steps backward as massive clouds of dust rose out of the crumbling rubble.

Now was the moment of truth. Jak braced herself as the other trolls, these Fae of Energy, shook the remaining stone and rubble off their torsos. If they attacked…

But they did not attack. One by one, they took steps closer to the large one. They gave no physical sign of obeisance, but each one faced their new leader with an air of respect. Something about the way they stood confirmed what Jak hoped. They would follow this new leader of theirs, and the rest of them could relax. The trolls were no longer an immediate threat to Jak and her army.

Skellig stood like she was ready to run at any moment. But time passed and the trolls gave no indication that they would attack. Their new leader turned towards them, towards Jak. She nodded at the giant Fae. He nodded back. Yes, they were safe from this group, thank the ancestors.

As if knowing that sticking around would stress the rest of them out, the big troll waved one arm as if telling the rest of the trolls to follow. One by one, they retreated through the rubble of the rock wall, and back into the mountain pass. Their leader met Jak's eyes and continued pointing. She thought she understood.

"You'll wait for us back there?" she asked.

He nodded, arm still raised.

“Very well. We’ll finish what we have left to do, then we will join you.”

A grunt was the only reply before the troll turned to follow his companions down the windy road that led further into the mountains. Jak could almost feel the collective sigh of relief from everyone around her as he disappeared.

Jak shrugged inwardly. She was fairly certain that the trolls would no longer provide any kind of threat, but it would take time to convince everyone else of that.

“Well, I’d say that was handled about as well as anyone could have hoped.” Gabriel’s voice was cheery. Both he and Skellig came to stand next to Jak. “Now may I ask what exactly happened back there with the demons? All we saw was the mountainside light up with an unnatural thunderstorm. The sound was deafening.”

“It’s a long story…” said Jak, bracing herself.

She caught them up on the battle, leaving nothing out, though she didn’t mention how she felt with all that power coursing through her. Best not to cause any alarm. As she spoke, they all began walking back towards the main battlefield, now that their little crisis with the trolls was at an end. Gabriel’s jaw dropped as he saw the remains of the thousands of demons among the grass, wisps of smoke still rising from the bodies of some. Though Jak was busy focusing on the queen’s army. They had stopped, which was good. But if they came any closer...

“You did all of this?” Skellig said. She sounded like she couldn’t believe what she was seeing, and said nothing of the queen.

“Not just me,” said Jak. “I formed a link with Yewin and that large troll you just met.”

“And you’re saying the troll is what gave you the power to do this?” Gabriel said, equally amazed.

“I guess. The link with the troll was different than the others. It seemed to be made of the energy I needed to perform the link. Before I would drain that energy out of the Fae. But this time it didn’t make a difference. I was even able to channel some of that energy back into Yewin, to keep him from weakening.”

“Incredible,” said Gabriel, moving among the dead bodies of demons. “We’ve never seen the Thunder brand do anything like this. What you’ve managed to achieve with the link to these trolls...”

“It may be the key to everything,” said a voice from behind them. Jak and the others turned to see Yewin approaching them. His body was as bright as ever, and a healthy color surrounded his face. “I can see the truth in it. Those trolls are literally the missing link. Their absence was the reason we could not link properly in the first place.”

“Their element is what gives all living things life,” said Jak. “I

could feel it. We all have the same energy, but compared to us, they're like a mountain standing next to a pebble. It was more power than I've ever felt."

Skellig gave her a flat stare as she said that. Did she suspect the temptation Jak had faced? But the major said nothing.

"I've heard some theorize this," said Gabriel thoughtfully. "Some suspect that what powers the brain is the same thing that powers a storm, though on a smaller, more controlled level. This could have serious ramifications in academia."

"Indeed," confirmed Yewin. "But I was thinking of its import in more relevant matters, like the formation of Illadar."

"I don't catch your meaning." Gabriel cocked his head.

"The young Seph, and his book, they mention that these trolls will be instrumental in the creation of Illadar, whatever that place ultimately entails."

That much was true, though Jak didn't really like the idea. She still didn't know what Illadar meant. Was such a place of peace brought about because of the power she would wield? Would peace come as a result of fear? Fear of her? She already knew that she could take out the queen and any army the woman threw at her. Was that the source of peace? Because it didn't feel very peaceful. A quick glance to the north told her that the queen was still advancing. Perhaps she would have to do something about the monarch sooner rather than later.

"I'm going to have to read that book in its entirety," said Skellig. "After everything that's happened, I think I can finally say: I'm a believer."

Jak glanced around at the Watchers and Fae who were busy recovering the bodies of the dead and wounded. Where was Seph? Her stomach did a somersault. He couldn't be…

Forgetting about Gabriel, Skellig, and Yewin, she dashed ahead, passing by the Fae and Watchers that carried the dead. She glanced at each one as she went.

"Seph," she called out. "Seph!"

There weren't many dead, not nearly as many as Jak would have feared before this all started, but she didn't spend much time rejoicing over that fact. Those that had been recovered were lined up next to each other, each one carried there by one of the Watchers or Fae. Less than a dozen, and none of them were Seph.

But not all the dead were accounted for yet, she'd have to order a full headcount. "Seph!" she yelled again, this time turning away from the main group and running into the field where the battle had taken place. Seph didn't have any kind of brand or combat training. He wouldn't have been foolish enough to try and fight, would he? A demon would have torn him to pieces.

She scanned the ground, searching for any non-demon bodies. If she didn't find him here, perhaps he was back towards the mountain pass. That would make more sense for a non-combatant like him.

Yes, that was more likely where he was. He had to be. Because if he wasn't…

A groan reached her ears, and her head snapped towards the sound. It was coming from just up ahead.

Sprinting, she covered the distance in a single bound. Someone was there, underneath a demon corpse. Without pausing to think, she pushed the body away and revealed a bloodied Seph underneath. Red blood. He was hurt!

"Seph!" she cried, her voice catching in her throat. A wave of something both euphoric and unpleasant passed through her, and her knees grew weak. "I've got you."

Seph groaned again as she helped him sit up. "Was that storm your doing?" he said, shaking his head as if to clear it. "It was about to kill me when a bolt of lightning struck right through it, and it collapsed right on top of me."

"You're bleeding." Jak said. "I…I think it's fine." Seph raised his arm, inspecting a torn and bloodied sleeve. "It only got my arm and I think it missed the artery. Looks worse than it is."

"What compelled you to even try to fight like that?" Jak said, standing straight and putting her hands on her hips. He looked at her, stunned at her change in attitude. Well serve him right for worrying her to death like that. "You know you don't stand a chance in battle."

"Thanks," he said dryly, getting to his feet and wincing as he put pressure on one leg. Like his arm, the leg had a long, shallow gash in it.

"You'll have to get those washed," she said, gesturing at his wounds. "Maybe if we're lucky we can find a Healer for you. We don't have any in the camp, so we'll have to travel to one of the nearby towns."

"I'll be fine."

"You would be if you just let me brand you like all the others," she said, hands on hips again. "I can give more than one brand, so if you were worried about which one to pick, you don't have to anymore."

"That was never the issue," he said, testing his leg by putting extra pressure on it. He took one limping step, but managed to do so without too much difficulty.

"Well what is, then?"

"I was told not to."

"By whom? They obviously aren't that smart if they're keeping you from healing."

"Well, since you can give second brands to anyone, why can't you

give someone else a Healer brand? That way they could heal me and there would be no harm done."

She opened her mouth to retort, but nothing came out. She hadn't thought of that. She closed her mouth and put on an air of confidence, like she had known about the idea all along. But his eye twinkled at her. He knew.

"Well maybe you deserve the extra pain. Might teach you a lesson," she said, and crossed her arms. But as Seph took another wincing step towards her, she softened. "Come on, we can get someone to look at that at least."

"I told you I'll be fine. And don't you have other things to worry about right now?" He nodded in the direction of the queen's army. Jak stared in that direction. Yes, they were very close now. She would have to deal with them soon. The thought brought all the relief of finding Seph crashing back down again. They weren't out of this yet. First the demons, then the trolls, and now the queen. What would be next after today, would the mountain collapse on them? Or would the dragon at Mt. Harafast come for them? Or Cain himself, now that his army lay desolate.

"You can go on," said Seph. "I'll work my way to the river to get washed up."

"And find some fresh bandages." Jak added, cocking her head at Seph's bloodied and torn clothes. She hoped Seph was right that the wounds really looked worse than they were.

"Right, and that," said Seph. He took a step away from her, towards the nearest part of the river.

Without thinking, she took a series of rapid steps towards him and wrapped her arms around his torso, bloody sleeves and all. A moment later, he returned the embrace.

"Don't do that to me again," she said.

"Okay, I won't," he said. "Though maybe it would be a good idea for you to teach me some of those techniques you've learned." She looked up at him to see him smiling down at her. He was talking about fighting techniques, right?

A sudden urge to hold him for a long time nearly overcame her. And maybe a little more than that. But she pushed those feelings aside. Seph needed medical attention, and she had pressing concerns at the moment. She released Seph.

"I guess I'll see you when I get back from dealing with the queen."

Seph nodded. "Be careful, she will find a way to surprise you if she can."

"I will. And…" she searched for words to say, something that would convey what she was feeling for him right now. Nothing adequate came to mind. "I hope you feel better soon," was what she

eventually landed on.

She faced the army approaching them from the north. They were close enough to hear now, the collective clink of armor and rhythm of marching soldiers drifted to her through the air.

It was time for this long night to end.

22

She stopped briefly to speak to Yewin and Gabriel, who were still surveying the aftermath of the battle. Naem was nearby, helping to carry the dead. Jak avoided meeting his gaze. He was the last person she wanted to talk to right now. After what happened to Seph, and what she was about to do, she couldn't be distracted by him just now.

"I'm going to the queen," she said as she approached Gabriel and Yewin.

Gabriel nodded at her. "You're taking that, I assume." He nodded at the Pillar of Eternity clutched in her hand. She glanced down at it. She had almost forgotten it was there. Her spear had fallen out of her other hand at some point, but something had kept her from letting go of the Pillar. Even though it had done little to serve her in battle, something told her it would soon be useful. Very soon.

"I'll need it," she said. "I doubt I'll be able to talk to her otherwise."

Gabriel nodded. "Well you don't need me to tell you to be careful."

Out of the corner of her eye she saw Naem coming closer with interest. Well, now was as good a time to leave as any. She took two steps away towards the queen's army before Gabriel made one last comment.

"Before you go, you should know that we discovered something about the demons."

Her pace slowed and she turned back to Gabriel and Yewin. "What is it?" she asked, silently cursing as Naem stepped even closer, intrigued by Gabriel's statement.

"They're not all from around here," said Yewin, standing up after having been bent over to examine one of the demons.

"What do you mean?"

"Well I was wondering where such a large army came from," said Gabriel. "Normally we assume most of the demons come from stray travelers, or perhaps an unfortunate farmer who ran afoul of someone like Cain. There *has* been an increase in disappearances lately. Those without a home in the city, people living on the outskirts. But it's

never been enough to warrant an army of this size. And that's in addition to the demons that attacked Foothold and Skyecliff."

"So where are they coming from?" said Naem, who had come to stand next to Gabriel as he spoke, pretending like he could just come in and be part of their conversation. Like he was important enough to be included. Jak pressed her lips together.

Gabriel, however, didn't seem to mind the question. "Well, we're looking at the corpses, and while it's sometimes difficult to discern after their changes, not to mention the mutilation they inflict on themselves, we think most of them are from outside the kingdom."

"You mean like the southern kingdoms?" Jak asked. She had met one of them before, he had been one of the Bright Fae. She didn't know much about them other than the fact that they had darker skin and hair, and only lightly traded on this side of the mountains. She looked closer at the demon Yewin had been examining. It was hard to tell if it had similar characteristics.

"Not just the southern kingdoms," said Yewin. "But we've spotted some that were clearly from the east, beyond the sea."

Gabriel nodded, adding, "Where Seph is originally from."

"Exactly," Yewin went on. "But it doesn't stop there. We think there are people here from all over the world. There are demons here that have facial features, or clothing that we don't recognize. And between the two of us—" he gestured at Gabriel, "—we've seen more than most."

"So Cain is gathering demons from all over. Do you know how he's getting around that fast?"

"Perhaps it hasn't been recent," offered Yewin. "It could be that he's been building a demon army for untold years, but only recently began gathering them into one place."

Jak's thoughts clouded. "That's not a pleasant thought."

"No, it isn't. But I thought it's something you should be aware of. It might be something to bring to the queen's attention as well."

Naem sniffed. "She'll probably just use it as an excuse to blame outsiders for all her troubles, like she blames the Fae now." Jak folded her arms at Naem. So he was an expert on the queen now? His apparent knowledge of the queen's faults would have come in handy before he had betrayed Jak to her lackeys in Skyecliff.

But Gabriel was nodding. "Perhaps, but at least it would reinforce the demons as a threat. Maybe enough for her to leave us alone in order to reinforce her own borders. As detrimental as it would be to things like trade and foreign relations, it might stop more demons to come in from outside."

"I don't like that line of thinking, Gabriel," said Yewin. "Shutting ourselves off can only lead to less understanding, not more."

“I agree,” said Gabriel, and grit his teeth. “I don’t see many positive outcomes out of all this, short of killing Cain. But even then, what would we do about the queen?”

Jak swallowed. That question had been what had haunted her for the last few days now. The only solution she saw was one in which they replaced the queen with their own rule. And that idea did not appeal to her at all. For one, she wasn’t fit to be a queen, and she wasn’t sure who she would trust with that kind of a responsibility. Skellig maybe, but even she made some pretty ruthless decisions at times. Was that what the kingdom needed? And would everyone even agree to follow someone like Skellig? Jak was fairly certain that they would not.

“Maybe we’ll know more once I speak to the queen,” she said. She pushed back the thought of telling them her doubts about what might be necessary. Better to wait to discuss that when they had more time and information to go on.

Naem opened his mouth as if to say something to Jak, but he was interrupted by Yewin, who hadn’t noticed. “Very well, Jak. I’m sure you know to be careful.”

Gabriel also nodded in agreement. “We don’t know what she has planned. See to it you use that—” he pointed at the Pillar of Eternity, “—to ensure she doesn’t get a chance to get the drop on you.”

Jak nodded. “I will.” With that, she turned, took a deep breath, and began marching towards the incoming royal army.

She hadn’t made it twenty paces when a voice sounded from behind. “Jak,” it said. Jak’s eyes closed, but she did not stop walking.

“Now’s not a good time, Naem,” she said as she marched.

“I know, but from the way you look at me, I’m not sure there will ever be a good time. And I told you, I don’t need to talk about our relationship.”

He pulled up alongside her, but she still did not stop her forward momentum. “So what do you want?” she asked.

“I don’t think you should go to the queen alone,” he said. “You don’t know what she’s planning.”

“And you haven’t seen what I can do with the Pillar of Eternity.”

“Exactly,” he said, surprising her. “She has seen that power, and she’s not a fool.”

“If you’re so worried, why didn’t you say something back there. Maybe the others would have agreed with you.” Or maybe they would have sided with her, and Naem would have seen how stupid he was being.

“I think they knew they couldn’t stop you if they tried.”

She rounded on him, “or maybe, they don’t think I’m as incapable as you seem to think.”

“What? No, you’re very capable. More than any of us.”

“Then I don’t see why I need your help.”

“Because one person can’t go up against a huge army. And what happens if the Pillar of Eternity creates more of those trolls? Do you have a plan on dealing with them?”

Jak’s lip curled. Seph hadn’t said any of these things. He had wished her well. He trusted her. Naem on the other hand couldn’t seem to realize that she didn’t want to be bothered by him. How had she found herself so attracted to the Watcher boy before? That was definitely one imperfection she was glad to have rectified.

“I don’t need to explain myself to you,” she said, turning back towards the army. They were almost within bow shot now. It was probably about time to use the Pillar of Eternity before going closer. The queen’s probably had word that she was on her way by now.

“Look, I’ve been sneaking around the queen and those loyal to her for months now. Ever since you left. I’m just saying it might help to have me along.”

“I don’t want you, Naem,” she called back. “If you want to help, go back and work with the others to clear the pass so we can leave.”

He did not respond, and she did not look back. But from what she could hear, he was not following her. Good. Now that was over…

She called on the magic of the Pillar of Eternity. Blessed silence greeted her as time froze. For the first time that night, she felt at peace. With this power, she had all the time in the world. She didn’t have to feel rushed, or worry about Naem coming to nag at her. She could just take a few deep breaths and focus on one thing at a time. And right now, that meant getting to the queen.

As she neared, she could clearly see the front line of soldiers. There were a few archers with their bows at the ready, though none looked like they were getting ready to fire on her last position. Hopefully the queen had not given orders to fire on her as she approached, not that they could hurt her anyway. The queen likely knew that.

She wove her way through the ranks, doing her best not to bump into the soldiers. Seeing as, to them, she was moving at breakneck speed, even the slightest touch would send one of them flying. Best to avoid that where possible. And if she managed to touch one of them on their skin, it might bring them into the bubble she had created around herself, meaning they would move at a higher speed as well. At least for as long as their connection remained.

Finally she made it past the front line, searching for a more heavily-guarded center position, one where she might find the queen. Maybe on a horse or…

There. Not far from where she stood, she could see a group of armed guards. That had to be where the queen was. She approached,

stepping carefully so as to avoid touching anyone. All of the guards were packed rather close together, and wearing leather armor which was odd. But they were heavily armed. They knew that the queen would be in danger if they came this close.

They were right to fear. They just didn't realize how futile their little preparations were.

Managing to squeeze past an elite archer of some kind, she entered a small clearing made by a circle of heavily armed guards and archers. And in the center was the queen. She wore those same riding clothes that her decoy had worn on that first day when she had tried to have Jak assassinated.

For a second, Jak hesitated. The queen was right there. She could just as easily kill the woman as blink. Then all of their troubles would be over. The army would enter into chaos, and those that hated the Fae would no longer have a leader at their helm. It would be so easy…

Once again, a tiny voice in the back of her head whispered to her. *What is right is never easy.* She closed her eyes and sighed. The little voice was right, of course.

For the second time now, she wondered what the source of that voice was. Was it the Pillar of Eternity? Before, when the Pillar had mysteriously reached out to her, it had been easier to discern. This time she wasn't sure. Was it even a real voice, or was it just in her head?

Shaking off the momentary distraction, she turned her attention back to the queen. If she could not kill the woman, or would not, then it was time to have one last conversation with her.

She stepped forward, reaching out to touch the exposed skin of the queen's pale hand.

To her credit, the queen did not react as surprised this time. She merely blinked and stared down at her hand.

"I assumed I would see you sooner or later. That was quite some show you put on out there." She gestured at the rain clouds that no longer thundered. There was not even a flicker of fear on her face. Well of course not. She had to put on some kind of facade after all.

"I've come to make peace," said Jak.

"We've talked about this already," said the queen. Her voice was bored. Bored! Did she not know how close Jak had been to killing her on the spot? "I can't exactly ignore the Fae as they are, and you've already proven that I can't trust you. After what happened to certain of my men…"

"That was not me," said Jak. "They were turning into Fae, like all the others."

"After exposure to your little toy there?" said the queen. "Yes, we

suspected as much."

"Then you know that I had no intentions of harming you. So why then would you break your oath to leave us in peace?"

"Simple, girl. The people would not have it. One thing you'll learn, if you ever get to that point, is that a ruler simply can't rule without the people's consent. When their friends changed before their eyes and began attacking those they had served with for years and years, well you can imagine that my little promise, that we never formalized I might add, meant very little to them. Once we recovered from our losses I promised we would attack as soon as reinforcement arrived from Tradehall."

Jak grit her teeth. "Even when you knew that I could decimate your army before any of them could blink?"

The queen met her eyes squarely. "Yes."

She said it so plainly, so directly, that it took Jak aback. "Why?" she asked.

"Because I believe myself to be a better judge of character than you seem to think. I knew you would not kill me without at least presenting your case one last time. I figured we could have a little chat." She shifted her weight onto her heels, nearly leaning into the guard behind her, though Jak kept a firm grip on the queen's hand. "So, I've explained the predicament I am in. Perhaps you would like to present solutions."

Jak took a deep breath. Was the queen really willing to listen? Or was she up to something? Jak glanced around, but there was no way the guards could hurt her while she was using the Pillar of Eternity. They wouldn't even be able to see her at this speed. The queen herself held no weapons. Jak met the queen's eyes.

"Very well. Let's talk."

"Alright. As I explained, I can't go against the wishes of my people. So I suggest we start by discussing how we can tactfully explain to them that you are not a threat."

Jak brought her lips together. "I did just kill off all of the demons."

"Hm, yes you did do that. And I suppose the enlightened would see that as being at odds with the assumption that you are in league with them."

"Only the enlightened? Shouldn't it be obvious?"

"You would think so, but even I can think of a half-dozen explanations for it. You slaughtered them to gain our trust, you are two warring factions among demonkind, or perhaps they were all an illusion. To name a few."

"But they weren't any of those things."

Queen Telma laughed. Actually laughed! "Girl, if you really want to play at this leader business you must learn some things. Chief

among them is that the truth does not matter, only that which people believe matters. And we are instrumental in crafting that truth for them."

"I can't believe that."

"You see, even you cannot accept truth when it stares you in the face." The queen shrugged. "Well I guess you are still young."

"Stop patronizing me and talk real solutions," said Jak, her eyes flashing.

"I was hoping you would have ideas," said the queen. "If I had some we wouldn't be having this conversation."

Jak grit her teeth. If she didn't know better, she'd say that the queen was stalling. But there was nothing to stall for. Everyone else around them was frozen in…

Something thudded into her from behind, something sharp. She blinked, her breath caught in her throat. A slow, thin smile spread across the queen's lips. "Well done, Jerrik." Who was she talking to? There was no one else but…

And then the pain caught up with her. White hot and agonizing, it spread from her back to her front. Jak looked down to see the bloodied tip of a long, thin sword protruding from her chest, just below her collar bone. What...what was…

She fell to her knees in front of the queen, letting go of the woman's hand. The Pillar of Eternity clattered to the ground.

23

Motion sprang to life around her. All of the guards surrounding the queen pointed swords and spears at her. It was like they knew she was there all along. But how could that be possible? Jak reached out a hand to summon her Thunder brand. But nothing came. The firelight surrounding them was beginning to blur in her eyes.

"What…" she managed to croak out.

The queen stared down her nose at Jak. "Did you really think that I would negotiate with a child? And you, of all people, the one who ransacked Skyecliff and killed many of my best men."

Jak choked and something dark flew onto the ground. She wiped at her mouth with her sleeve. It was blood. "But you said…"

"I said what you wanted to believe. I did not lie when I said that truth is only what you make of it. The trick to any monarch is to find the truths that will reap the greatest advantage, both for those that follow us, and those that do not."

Jak tried to say, "I will never believe that," but the words were lost as she choked again. The queen smiled and knelt next to Jak.

"You had me worried for a while there," she whispered so that only Jak could hear. "I admit, I honestly didn't know how we were going to stop you. But after our last encounter you gave me an idea. I realized that bringing someone into...whatever sort of time bubble you create with this thing…" she reached for the Pillar of Eternity.

Jak's eyes widened and summoning all her remaining strength she clutched at the Pillar, grabbing hold of it. Desperate, she tried to reach for its magic, to get her out of there. Anything that would help her escape, or stop the pain. But its magic did not come to her. Relics, it hurt so much. She couldn't concentrate.

The queen smiled. She knew Jak was helpless, and that she would have used the Pillar to escape if she could. Yes, she knew Jak was completely at her mercy. "We'll take that staff off your corpse soon enough. Regardless, I was eventually able to figure it out. If I could keep my personal guard close, close enough to touch, than all I would

need to do is touch one of them while you held me in the grip of...that thing's magic."

Jak tried to breath, and it was not easy. She stared behind the queen at the nearest guard. That's why they were all standing so close. They needed to touch each other. Jak tried to turn and stare behind her. Pain flashed in her chest, and she nearly fell off her knees to her side. But she saw enough to know that the person who had stabbed her was connected by a string of hands all the way to the queen. They had been brought into the time bubble with Jak and Telma, and Jak hadn't even noticed.

At a signal from the queen, the guard behind Jak pulled the long blade out. The pain redoubled, and this time Jak did fall to her side. If she hadn't been so focused on just taking her next breath, she would have screamed. She had a Healing brand. It would be working now, doing its best to knit the wound together. If she could get away she might still have a chance of living. But a stab wound through the chest, that would take days to heal fully, and that was if she could get away and stop the bleeding.

Her thoughts clouded, as did her eyes. She was loosing too much blood. She would pass out in a second if something…

"Finish her off," said the queen. Tears of pain and loss clouded Jak's vision further. This was it, she was going to die here. Not in a blaze of glory fighting Cain, not overcome by hordes of demons, but lying broken in front of a corrupt queen.

The guard behind the queen stepped forward, pulling a thin sword off his back.

Jak summoned all the strength she had left in her, both her own and that of her brand, and brought herself back to her knees. An ordinary human would not have been able to fight through the pain, but she was not an ordinary human. White-hot pain blossomed in her chest, but she pushed herself upright. She would meet her death head on, not curled up and bleeding on the ground. She faced the guard as he held the sword above his head, reading to swing it down on her skull.

"Persistent to the end," said the queen. "I will say I admire that about you. In another life you would have found a place of honor at my side. But I'm afraid I can't risk letting you live. A pity."

She turned away with a wave of her hand at the guard. He pulled back the sword, aimed directly at her face. She stared him down, her bloody lips pressed tightly together, warding off the pain and fear, replacing it with pure defiance. Naem had been right. Coming here alone had been a mistake, even after all that power she wielded. She had let it get to her head, made her complacent. And she would pay for it now with her life.

Hopefully the others would learn from her mistakes. Hopefully they would run, and not fight back, not try to take out their vengeance over her death. The Fae needed to survive. That was what mattered most.

Shouting sounded behind her, but she did not turn to look. She kept her eyes fixed on the man in front of her, bearing the instrument of her death. His eyes, however, glanced at something over her shoulder. What was he looking at now? The queen had disappeared behind a wall of soldiers. And Jak's vision was closing in on her. She could see nothing but her executioner and his weapon. The man brought his attention back to Jak just long enough to finally bring his sword down.

Perhaps the power of the Pillar of Eternity still worked, for Jak saw his arms descend as if in slow motion. It sped through the air, right at her head, growing larger in her vision.

Then, out of nowhere, two hands reached out from above and behind her, and slapped on either side of the blade, pinning it in place.

The hand belonged to a person who leapt over Jak in one fluid motion, his feet kicking out into the air as he did so to knock the sword out of the guard's hand. Suddenly time sped up again and everything seemed to happen at once.

Her savior was Naem. Even as her vision blurred in the dark of night, she could tell it was him by the way he fought. No one had the mastery over Grace like he did. No one could duck and weave, parry and strike like he could. Even the queen's guard, at least one of whom had to be branded with Grace himself, could not keep up with him.

Naem froze in midair as a Telekinetic seized hold of him with his mind. Jak spun her head to find the culprit. He was standing not far away with his arms out, in an attempt to mentally hold Naem in place while someone else dealt the killing blow.

Perhaps her Healing brand, compounded with her Strength brand were finally beginning to kick in. A renewed vigor seized hold of Jak and she grabbed the nearest object available, a small dagger lodged in the belt of an unsuspecting guard.

Pulling it out of its sheath, she hurled it at the Telekinetic. It found its mark, burying itself to the hilt in the man's neck. The man clutched at the blood that gushed its way out. He fell to his knees and collapsed on the ground.

Encouraged, Jak tried to stand, but the moment she did so, the pain in her chest redoubled and she fell back to her knees with a cry.

Someone caught her.

Looking up, she saw Naem, a concerned look in his eyes. Killing the Telekinetic must have set him free. But others were closing in. A

Flamedancer spewed fire at them, and more raised arrows and spears. They weren't going to make it. Naem had come all this way just to get himself killed. And how had he even gotten here so fast? She had been using the Pillar of Eternity for almost the entire time since she last saw him. There was no way he could have run all that distance in the short time after she'd been stabbed.

Naem did not miss a beat. With a slight twist of his body, he raised her arms and got underneath her. She realized what was happening just as he stood up straight, lifting her above his shoulders.

She screamed, dropping the Pillar of Eternity as the pain in her chest shook her entire body. Blood trickled down Naem's back. Her blood. For just a moment, she blacked out. Even with Healing and Strength being the only things keeping her conscious, they would not do much good as long as the bleeding continued. And she couldn't cauterize the wound here.

Naem stooped and picked up the Pillar, waving it frantically to ward off the oncoming attackers.

But they did not come.

Jak's breathing was coming on fast, but she could finally see what was going on around her. Naem had stopped thrashing about in an attempt to avoid the magic and weapons of the guards. Because every last one of them stood frozen in place. One had his palms out, spewing out a jet of flame that hung in midair. Another literally floated just above them, with spear in hand ready for gravity to bring him down so he could skewer the both of them. But time stood still.

"What's going on?" Naem said aloud.

Jak was having a hard time believing what was happening too, though she recognized the magic immediately.

"You...ack," she coughed and flecks of blood peppered Naem's shoulder. Lowering her voice to a rasping whisper, she forced out the words, "You must have activated the Pillar of Eternity."

Naem raised the staff in one hand, staring at its polished length. "How? I thought others had tried to use it already."

Jak didn't know, but her head was swimming again with the effort of talking. She was still losing blood, and if she didn't get that fixed soon…

That was her last thought before she blacked out.

24

Something cold splashed her face. Jak sputtered and her eyes snapped open.

She was alive.

She knew that fact immediately, because a dead person would not feel the pain she had in her chest at that moment. It was more of an ache now, instead of a sharp, white-hot sensation. But it was far from a dull ache.

She groaned, and even the sound vibrating from her throat to the rest of her body was enough to hurt. She stopped immediately.

She blinked, trying to make sense of the dark world around her. How was she still alive? She had passed out from loss of blood.

Amelia's face moved into her vision. She was staring down at Jak. Water swirled around the Water Fae. But Jak wasn't in the water. No, she was on the ground. That was the hard surface beneath her.

"She's coming to!" said Amelia emphatically. The girl's overly enthusiastic voice rang in Jak's sensitive ears.

Jak shifted her arms at her sides and tried to sit up. The ache in her chest quickly flared to something more urgent and she gasped, collapsing back on the ground.

"Careful," said Amelia. "You almost died."

"Wh...what—" Jak's voice came in a rasp, "—happened?"

"Naem managed to cauterize the wound before he brought you to us, otherwise you might not have made it back to us. We cleaned you up, and helped your mother care for you."

"Mother?" Jak glanced around her. She couldn't see much other than the starry sky above, and Amelia's face.

"I'm here," said a concerned voice. It was her mother's. A second face appeared beside Amelia's, this one trailing shadowy tendrils, and sporting two glowing green eyes. The sight would have frightened most people in Jak's position, but it only made her relax. It was her mother's face. "We know a few things about healing herbs found in the mountains. We've used what we have, but we don't have a Healer in the camp so there's not much more we can do." Karlona's face was

full of concern.

"It's okay, I feel better already," said Jak. That was only partially true. She still felt like someone had taken a blacksmith's hammer to her chest, repeatedly. But her Healing brand would ward off infection, and as long as the bleeding didn't continue, she should live.

Slower this time, she tried rising to her elbows again, fighting through the pain. Everyone was there, though most stood a safe distance away, probably on Karlona's order. Skellig, Gabriel, Seph, Yewin, Girwirt, Noralim, and even one of the trolls. Judging by its size, she figured it was the leader she had befriended, though it was still hard to tell the difference between two different trolls. Behind them stood more of their company, humans and Fae alike. They were all gathered to watch what happened to her. Finally, her gaze rested on Naem. He stood directly across from her, still grasping the Pillar of Eternity.

"What about the queen?" she asked.

"She hasn't made a move yet, but we're expecting her to attack at any minute," said Skellig.

"I got you out of there in a hurry, using this," Naem brandished the Pillar of Eternity. "But I couldn't keep it up for long once I got you here. I needed everyone else's help to keep you alive."

Gabriel and Yewin were looking at Naem curiously, as if wishing they could ask how he had used the staff's magic. But they kept their peace, wisely sticking to the matters at hand.

"She's going to attack," said Jak, wincing as she tried to push herself up further. Karlona bent to place one hand on her shoulder.

"Most of us have already retreated into the mountain pass. That will give us the tactical advantage," said Skellig.

Jak met the major's eyes, "but how many will we lose if we fight, even in the pass?"

Skellig's lips pressed to a thin line. Jak saw the answer there. If they fought, they would likely lose everyone.

"We either have to run and hide," said Skellig, choosing her words carefully. "Or, there is one possibility to win against them in battle." She gave Jak a knowing look.

Jak shook her head. "I'm afraid I can't do that."

"If you're not feeling well, perhaps we could hold out long enough for your Healing to take effect, and then we could…"

"No," Jak interrupted. "I will not attack fellow humans in anything but self-defense."

The corners of Skellig's mouth twitched. "How is a preemptive strike not a defensive one?"

"Because our first goal is, and should always be, to preserve life at all costs."

Skellig took a deep breath, but did not argue. They had had this conversation before, and Skellig had clearly taken it partially to heart when she had attacked the trolls. She had chosen to trap them rather than kill them. She would understand.

Jak reached out a hand to her mother. “Help me up. Just because I won’t attack them doesn’t mean there isn’t something I can do.”

Karlona did not take Jak’s hand. “You need rest,” she said.

“I can rest when we don’t have an army on our tail.” Jak responded. “Don’t worry, your herbs and my Healing brand have taken the edge off the pain.”

Karlona hesitated a while longer before finally taking Jak’s outstretched hand.

Jak gasped for air as she staggered to her feet. Naem stepped forward to help Karlona steady her. She almost pushed him away, and would have had she not been about to fall over.

After a few deep breaths, she managed to hold herself steady. Her blood was pounding in her ears, and with each pulse her wound flared. But it didn’t begin bleeding again, and she could breathe. Those were good signs.

She nodded at her mother, who let her go, though she kept her hands up, as if expecting Jak to collapse at any minute. Jak turned to Naem. “I’ll need that back,” she gestured to the Pillar of Eternity that he still held in his other hand.

He nodded, and handed it over. Her fingers closed around its cool, black surface. And before Naem could pull his hand away, she brought her free hand around to hold it firmly in place around the Pillar of Eternity. Then she activated its magic.

The pain still interfered with her concentration, but unlike before, she was able to concentrate well enough to bring time to a standstill. Naem, still holding onto the Pillar came into the time bubble with her. His quick glance at their surroundings told her that he knew what was happening.

“I needed to talk with you privately, and this was the only way to find the time,” she said, taking a deep breath. “I feel I owe you an apology.”

Naem shook his head. “No, I’m the one that betrayed you in Skycliff. Perhaps if I hadn’t done that, things...would have worked out differently. For the Fae I mean. Perhaps we could have avoided the slaughter that followed, and the shifting attitudes against the Fae.”

Jak regarded him. She knew what he wasn’t saying that would also have worked out differently. They would probably still be together.

“You made a mistake,” she said. “A bad one, and I still don’t know if I will ever trust you fully.”

Naem opened his mouth as if to say something, but she raised one

hand to keep him from doing so. “But…I also made a mistake. I let my resentment for what you did influence my actions.”

He swallowed. “Like you said, you don’t have any reason to trust me.”

“No, but that wasn’t the biggest mistake I made. I let my confidence in my own abilities make me blind to the help that you could have provided. You were the only one who saw that, the only one who said something.”

The beginnings of a smile graced his lips. “You were being pretty reckless.”

Jak stopped herself from rolling her eyes. He didn’t have to confirm it when she said she was wrong. Though instead of protesting, she said, “and I paid for it, almost with my life. I can’t imagine what would have happened if that guard had cut off my head, or even stabbed me in the heart. I would have died before my Healing brand could have done anything about it.”

“Well, it all worked out in the end. You can learn from that.”

Jak nodded. “I can. And I will. But before we move on, I just wanted to say…thank you. And if I ever make any signs of doing something dumb like that again, I want you to say something. I promise not to get mad at you for it.”

Naem cocked an eyebrow. “I’ll remember you said that.”

“Don’t push it,” Jak added, narrowing her eyes at him.

Naem smiled, the first time she had seen him do so since he arrived. “Don’t worry, I’ll only say something when you’re really being dumb.”

Jak had half a mind to wrench the Pillar of Eternity away and leave him frozen like the rest of them, but she resisted that impulse. Instead she changed the subject. “Do you know why the Pillar of Eternity worked for you?”

“I don’t know. I thought I heard it say something to me right before it happened. Is that weird?”

Jak shook her head. “Not at all, that’s what happened to me right before I used it the first time. What did it say?”

“Well, I was a little preoccupied with staying alive, but I think it said something like ‘save lives.’”

Jak focused her gaze on the Pillar. Yes, that sounds about right. The Relic was as concerned with saving lives as she was now. More so, even. That would explain why she couldn’t kill demons or anyone else for that matter using its power. It would explain why it would lend its strength to Naem. It did so to save her life. Would it allow her to kill someone like Cain, if the opportunity arose?

“Well, I suspect the Pillar understands a person’s inner self better than I do,” she said. “I’d be a fool not to give you the chance you

deserve from here on out."

Naem shuffled his feet, "That...that doesn't mean."

"No," she stopped him right there. "You and I cannot have that anymore, I'm sorry."

"Right, yes," he said, acting like it had been a stupid question. "Sorry, I just thought...the way you said it…"

"I thought you said you didn't want that anymore?" Jak asked.

Naem remained still for a moment, staring into empty space while he considered his words. Then he met her eyes. "Jak, I don't think I will ever not want us to be together. I don't expect it, and I won't ask for it, but that does not mean that I don't wish it. I regret what I did all the more for it."

Jak stared at him. Was he really being serious? After everything that had happened, he *still* felt that way about her?

"I'm sorry, Naem. I can't give you that anymore."

"I know, and I understand why. I'm sorry I brought it up, I won't again."

He looked away, and his hand loosened on the Pillar of Eternity. Jak put one hand on his, to keep it there.

"Naem, when I said I didn't trust you, I really only meant emotionally. You're welcome in the camp, and among the Fae. I trust you to have their interests, and mine, at heart. But I can't open that part of myself to you again."

She wanted to say more, to say that she was sorry. But anything more would have been hollow. So she left it at that. They didn't say anything more for a while.

Finally, Naem spoke. "I understand. I'm happy to help out where I can."

He didn't look happy, but Jak accepted his offer with a nod. "And I forgive you for what has happened in the past. Can we agree to move on with our lives?"

"I'd like that."

With a smile that attempted to hide the sorrow she felt, Jak let the magic of the Pillar of Eternity fade.

"So what's your plan?" said Skellig. None of them were aware that anything had happened between her and Naem. Time had gone on for them.

"We put on a demonstration. Something to discourage them from attacking."

"You want to scare them?"

"Fear is a powerful motivator, but I have a feeling that it will work against us in the long run. If we scare them, we might avoid a battle now, but it will only reinforce the idea that the Fae are a threat. No, I have another idea. One that some of you might not like, but one I

think might just work."

"Let's hear it then," said Girwirt. "If you giants aren't as blind as you are stupid, you'll notice that there's an army about to attack us. We gnomes don't do as well as you humans when we're facing those pointy sticks of yours."

"Girwirt," said Noralim from beside the gnome. "It's not nice to call someone stupid. We've been over this. You've got to…"

"But the gnome is right," said Skellig, cutting Noralim off and turning to Jak. "Tell us what you have in mind."

Jak turned to look at all who was presently gathered. "Can I count on all of you?" She met the eyes of the troll in particular, who had made no sound this entire time. The giant creature met her gaze with steady eyes. It nodded, as did everyone else.

So she began to outline the details.

25

They stood on the battlefield, only a handful of them, the leaders of each Fae and human group. Everyone that stood on the council, apart from Amelia and Cerai of course. The Water Fae couldn't exactly extend their reach this far inland. But they would make an appearance soon enough.

Naem was there too, holding the Pillar of Eternity for now. Skellig had questioned her decision on that, wondering why she would let him hold such a powerful Relic after what he had done to her. And while it was a definite risk, something told Jak that Naem could be trusted. At least he could for now. He had learned his lesson. Besides, she had a job for him.

Skellig was the only member of the council who wasn't present. She was busy leading the rest of their people, Fae and humans, through the mountain pass. Now it was Jak's job to hold off the entirety of Queen Telma's army with less than a dozen people.

"I don't like this," said Girwirt from one side. "We're too exposed."

His usual, almost humorous cynicism was gone, replaced by something more serious. He must really be worried. Noralim stood beside him and said nothing, but had the same nervous look in his eye. His hands were clasped together, fidgeting with themselves. Jak glanced at all the others. Gabriel and Seph stood resolute, though they too did not look happy. Of the group, they were the weakest in combat, and mostly here to show human support of the Fae.

On Jak's other side were Karlona, Yewin, and Naem. All three gripped their weapons in their hands, confident yet wary. If things didn't go according to plan, this could mean their death, and they knew that. Surprisingly, it was Naem that shared the most confidence. His smile deepened, and he winked at Jak as she caught his eye.

Of course, it was the large troll standing behind her that showed the least emotion. He stood there, towering over the rest of them, facing the queen's army as though they were a mild interest, not an army capable of killing even him.

The army was forming ranks in front of them, soldiers creating a

line of shields and spears, archers readying themselves behind them. Telekinetics and Flamedancers activating their brands, evident from the light pouring out of their left hands. They were close enough that Jak could make out some of their expressions. They ranged from angry, to afraid, to indifferent. A few looked confused, probably wondering why just a handful of their enemy had come to face them.

One face she did not see was that of the queen herself. Did she fear for her life? She must know that even wounded as Jak was, she was more than powerful enough to single the queen out and kill her. Not that Jak would do something like that, of course. There was a time when she had thought it through, but not anymore. The grudge the queen held against Jak wasn't all that different from the animosity she'd held against Naem. It was based on the hurt that they had received, and fear of the future, but it was not based in logic or compassion. And both of those were what Jak needed now.

Wherever the queen was, she hoped she was paying attention.

She looked up at the large troll standing behind her. He hadn't said much, as was their way apparently, but he had agreed to come with her and stand by her side. She would need him for what came next.

She took a deep breath, slowly so as not to further aggravate the pain in her chest. She was about to make a huge gamble. Hopefully it would work.

Nodding at the large troll, she turned back to face the army. A rumble behind her signaled the troll's approach as he stepped up immediately behind her and placed his rocky hands on her shoulders. Those hands were so big they covered most of her upper arm as well. It was a good thing the troll was on her side, or she would be helpless against it in a position like this.

Then the link came.

For the second time, a rush of mad energy flooded through her. She almost felt like her entire body was awash with light. Surely her skin and hair could not contain such magnitude. Part of her wondered how it was not burning her up from the inside.

The night was still dark, and the storm clouds had passed, but the air still crackled with power. Her hair rose and fanned out behind her. Again that feeling of elation, that she could do anything, clouded her mind. With this power she could lay waste to the queen's army, just as she had with the demons. But that was not why she was here. She pushed the thought aside.

Instead she channeled some of that power into her own body, strengthening her own muscles and organs. Perhaps it could even help her heal faster, though she doubted it worked like that. What she needed now was a strong voice.

"FRIENDS!" The words exploded out of her mouth when she spoke,

loud enough that Seph and Gabriel, who stood beside her, covered their ears in surprise. Jak was tempted to do the same. That volume had been unexpected, even for her.

She paused, watching as the soldiers ahead of them peered out from their shields to get a good look at her. Yes, she had their attention.

"YOU HAVE SEEN WHAT WE CAN DO," she bellowed, growing used to the sound. She was vaguely aware of an increase in the pain in her chest when she spoke, but with all that power coursing through her, it only barely registered. "WE DEFEATED THOUSANDS OF DEMONS WITH BARELY A CASUALTY."

She winced as she said it. There had been casualties, and even one was too many. She didn't like playing it down, but she had to get the point across.

She raised her hand skyward, calling on the energy of the troll's link, as well as that of her Thunder brand. Lightning shot through the sky, not from any cloud, but from her own hand. That was the signal.

From the river, a huge wave erupted out of its depths. It rose through the air like a great sea serpent, twisting and writhing as the Water Fae gathered more and more river water to add to it. It did not come close enough to touch the army, but simply hung in the air, a threat to anyone who would oppose it.

A ripple spread through the army. Yes, they knew what the Water Fae were capable of. Many of them would have seen their power firsthand at Skyecliff. And those who hadn't, now had a demonstration to give them an idea.

To her sides, the other Fae activated their own abilities. Her mother raised a cloud of darkness on her side, so that only the pinpricks of green light that were her eyes shone through. Yewin did the opposite on his side, raising his level of brightness to something far beyond the largest bonfire. Many of the soldiers shielded their eyes. Girwirt stepped in front of Jak and put his hands to the ground. Just like that, it began to melt before her eyes, grass burning in an instant as the rock and dirt congealed together. Hot, dry air radiated at Jak's face as Girwirt worked.

The opposing army apparently got their point. Most began taking a few steps back, and murmurs and shouting reached her ears, though some only seemed angered further. She could not make out what they were saying, but she had succeeded in sowing a little fear in the group.

But fear was not why they were here. With another burst of power to the sky, she sent the second signal. All of her companions immediately stopped what they were doing. Girwirt returned to his place, letting the molten ground in front of him cool. Yewin

extinguished his light, and Karlona did the same with her shroud of darkness. Last of all, the Water Fae brought the column of water back towards the river, finally allowing it to fall back into its place.

"THERE IS MUCH WE COULD DO TO YOU," shouted Jak. "BUT THAT WOULD ACCOMPLISH NOTHING. WE DO NOT WANT YOU TO FEAR US. KNOW THIS. WE WILL NOT ATTACK YOU TODAY. WE KNOW MANY OF YOU WOULD LIKE TO SEE US DEAD. WE DO NOT WISH THE SAME. ALL WE WISH IS TO PEACEFULLY COEXIST."

Jak paused, letting that sink in. She tried her best to read the expressions on their faces. Were they considering her words, or were they passing them off as the rantings of a mad woman in league with dangerous Fae. Did anyone out there view them as anything more than an advance type of demon?

She swallowed, preparing for what she was about to say next.

"TO THAT END," she said, choosing words she had carefully selected before coming here. "I WOULD OFFER YOU SOMETHING IN RETURN, SOMETHING TO PROVE THAT I AM ON YOUR SIDE."

Her eyes strayed to find Seph. He and Gabriel stood side by side, watching her along with everyone else. Though Seph had no skill in combat, she needed him here, if for nothing else than the support his presence gave her.

The barest nod was all the confirmation she needed. She faced the opposing army head on. "WE ARE PREPARED TO OFFER YOU A DEAL. IF YOU LAY DOWN YOUR ARMS AND JOIN US, I WILL GIVE YOU ADDITIONAL BRANDS."

Oh yes, that prompted a response. This time she could almost feel the ripple effect as soldiers turned to their comrades, passing on what she had said to those at the rear of the army, or confirming that they had heard correctly.

Of course, the queen had probably done a lot to discredit her when it came to obtaining multiple brands. Traditionally, most would assume that an extra brand would kill a person or turn them into a demon. But she also knew that half the population of Skyecliff had seen her fight using more than one brand. The queen wouldn't have been able to stop the speculation that would have developed.

"WE KNOW THIS MEANS LABELLING YOURSELF AS A DESERTER. SOME WILL CALL IT TREASON. SOME WILL CALL IT HERESY. BUT WE HAVE PROOF THAT SUCH A THING IS POSSIBLE. IMAGINE NEEDING A TENTH OF THE FOOD OR SLEEP THAT YOU DO NOW. IMAGINE WHAT YOU COULD ACCOMPLISH WITH ADDED STRENGTH, GRACE, OR HEALING ABILITIES. YOUR FAMILIES MAY JOIN US AS WELL. TOGETHER WE WILL FORM A GREAT, INDEPENDENT SOCIETY. ONE WHERE ALL WHO SEEK FOR PEACE ARE WELCOME."

She stopped, taking a moment to breathe. The wound in her chest was beginning to ache more than usual. Probably from all the energy provided by the link, and from all the shouting. She'd have to rest soon.

"WE WILL AWAIT THOSE INTERESTED PARTIES APPROXIMATELY TWO MILES INTO THE MOUNTAIN PASS, WHERE IT IS NARROWEST. AND SHOULD YOU WISH TO ATTACK US THERE, WE WILL BE READY FOR THAT AS WELL."

For emphasis, she called on her Thunder brand one last time, sending sparks flying all around them.

Now it was Naem's turn. Jak did not have the strength to use the Pillar of Eternity for long, so it was his job to do so. In the blink of an eye, Naem disappeared and reappeared right next to her. Relics, but that was fast. Was that what it was like when she moved using the Pillar?

Naem grabbed her hand and let the magic of time wash over them both. The clink of armor and sound of murmuring soldiers ceased. All that was left was blessed silence.

"Great speech," said Naem. "Now let's get you somewhere where you can rest."

They walked back towards the mountain pass, using the power of the Pillar of Eternity. Unfortunately this meant walking hand in hand, which caused Jak's face to redden. And not in the good way. When this was over, Jak was going to have to find a way to extend the power of the staff through more than just physical touch. Hopefully such a thing was possible because this was beyond uncomfortable.

Thankfully, Naem seemed to sense her discomfort, and let go once they were a safe distance away. As his hand left hers, he blurred from her vision and then departed completely. Within seconds, Karlona, Gabriel, Seph, and all the others were there, having been led by the hand, all connected to Naem as he wielded the Pillar of Eternity. Even the troll managed to travel this way, causing a rumble that shook the whole earth.

To the queen's army, it would have looked like they all vanished within seconds, adding to the mysterious illusion of power that they wanted to present. Hopefully she had done her job in impressing some of them. At the very least, she hoped they would not attack after this. She was sure the queen had heard her proposal, and would do everything she could to prevent deserters from joining Jak and the Fae. Perhaps no one would leave, but as long as they did not attack, Jak would be satisfied.

When they were all assembled a safe distance away from the army, they began walking back to the mountain pass at a normal speed. Naem was out of breath from running back and forth for each person.

“Well now we’ll see how many of those soldiers are loyal to the queen.”

“I knew they wouldn’t just agree not to attack us,” said Jak. “That’s why I offered them something in return.”

“Yes, more brands.” Gabriel stroked his beard. “It’s a dangerous call. And do we really want the type of people that would abandon their loyalties for such a reward.”

“Some no, but some will come because it's right, because they’ve become disillusioned with the society they live in. People will come. We’ve just given them one last incentive to do so, not just with the brands, but with a promise of a more fulfilling life, a promise of peace.”

“Illadar,” said Seph under his breath, but loud enough that Jak could hear it.

She met his knowing eyes. “Yes, I suppose so,” she said.

“The last thing we need is more giants ruining everything,” said Girwirt. Jak cocked an eyebrow at the gnome. He hesitated. “But I suppose it would mean we’d have more hands to find mushrooms for us. And strong backs to climb on when we’re tired.”

Jak grinned and shook her head. That gnome. Why was he the representative of his race again?

“We’ll see what happens,” said Gabriel. “Either they’ll come, or they won’t. But I think we gave them enough reason to refrain from attacking. At least for the time being.”

“I agree,” said Yewin. “I saw the truth in their eyes. Those that won’t join us will be too afraid to attack. I would guess word of this night will spread far and wide. You might not know what you’ve unleashed in offering more brands, Jak.”

Jak nodded. She knew that would be the case. In fact, that was probably why she had been hesitant to give any brands to Elva and some of Seph’s other followers. It would only open the floodgates. But now that was out in the open. She would deal with the consequences.

“And let’s not forget—” Seph began, “—that you’ve now set yourself up as a direct opponent of the queen. Even if you do claim to be peaceful, she will see this as an aggressive, competitive act. She will think you’re trying to tear the kingdom away from her.”

“Yes, I knew she would,” said Jak. “And there was a time when I might have considered doing just that. But we can’t just take authority because we can.” After another moment she chuckled and added, “The queen herself told me that a monarch can’t do anything that the people oppose. Well this has to be the people’s decision. If they choose to follow us, to follow me, then let them.”

“And when the queen chooses to attack?” Seph asked. He did not say ‘if’.

“We’ll be better prepared,” Jak answered. “While I don’t plan on attacking first, our goal should be to become powerful enough that she would not dare attack. Force her to restrain herself.”

“Out of fear?” This time it was Karlona who spoke.

Jak pressed her lips together. Yes, unfortunately fear would likely become a tactic they could not get around. People were going to fear them, whether she wanted them to or not. It just didn’t have to be the only tactic they used. “That will be up to the queen. She knows that I won’t be the first to attack. Let her make of that information what she will.”

They passed the edge of the battlefield where the demon army had stood. Dead bodies littered the area. If they weren’t about to leave, they would work at piling the bodies together and burning them. As it was, they had no time, so the corpses would likely stay here to rot. Travelers would have to avoid the region for weeks or even months due to the smell of decay.

One question still nagged at Jak’s mind. What had Cain been up to in sending that army against them. Had he been trying to convince the queen that they were in league with the demons? That seemed the obvious answer, from the way they had avoided attacking until provoked. But was there more to it? It seemed an awful waste to send such a large army there, when Cain likely knew what she was capable of.

Or did he? Was the army merely a way of testing the waters, seeing what she could do? That thought did not give her much comfort.

Whatever Cain was up to, they needed to be prepared for it, whatever that took.

26

"I'm glad you're back safely," said Skellig upon their arrival. They were at the entrance to the pass now, with the mountain towering over them. "What was their response?"

"Well they haven't shown signs of attacking yet," said Seph. "I'd say that's about as good of a response as we can expect from an army led by Telma."

"We gave them the option of joining us," said Jak. "We'll wait for a while to see if anyone takes us up on the offer."

"But we have some time at least?" Skellig asked. When Jak nodded, she added, "Good, because we need to see to the matter of burying our dead."

That brought a soberness to the group. Everyone stared at the ground, even Girwirt had a look of sorrow on his face.

"Of course," Jak said. "Where are the shovels?"

"Not you, Jak. You're still recovering." Skellig folded her arms.

The wound burned, but she was still standing. And the bleeding had long stopped. She could help. But Skellig didn't look like she was backing down. Well that was fine. She could find the shovels by herself. She brushed past Skellig and found the nearest wagon, rummaging through the belongings there. The others didn't stop her.

When she finally found a shovel, she made her way to the mouth of the pass. There was a small foothill overlooking the plains that would make a good spot, a fitting memorial to those who died on the battlefield.

She plunged the shovel into the ground, and heaved up a clump of dirt. Instantly her body protested. She was already tired enough as it was, even with Strength and Sleeplessness on her side. But she could rest later. This was more important.

She dug the shovel in again, and again. Soon others arrived and began to pitch in. Seph was first, giving her a small smile before he dug his own shovel into a patch of ground beside hers. That smile did not have the same enthusiasm that Jak was used to seeing. A touch of soberness darkened his eyes. And Jak could understand why. Elva and

several others that followed him were among the dead.

The digging reminded Jak of another time she had done this very thing. That time she had been not far from here, digging her own father's grave. In both cases it represented a sobering experience, but there was something almost cathartic about it as well. Perhaps it was the fact that it felt like she was doing something, that her situation wasn't helpless, even though the deaths of her friends and family certainly made it seem so. It was an odd dichotomy of emotions.

After just a few minutes of steady work, a series of thundering booms that shook the ground announced the arrival of several trolls. Jak looked up at the arrivals. Hadn't most of them retreated further into the mountains? She hesitated, as did everyone else holding a shovel. It would take a while before everyone fully trusted the creatures.

The big one, their leader, stepped forward to where Jak was digging her grave. With a giant hand, he dug a huge trough into the ground, accomplishing in seconds what it had taken Jak several minutes to complete. The large troll tossed the dirt aside, before bending for a second handful. The other trolls fanned out, and began to follow suit.

They were helping to dig the graves.

With the troll's help, it didn't take them long to finish up. Soon just over a dozen pits lay before them on the small hill. By that time, Skellig had arranged for the bodies to be brought beside them. Then began the even more sobering task of laying each one in their respective graves.

Jak supposed it could have been worse. Their casualties remained under twenty, and could have included their entire army had it not been for Jak. But the magnitude of their victory only made things worse in a way. If Jak could have called that lightning storm much earlier, perhaps the others would not have needed to fight at all.

Jak wiped a tear from her eye as Elva was brought forward. A hand grasped her shoulder from behind, and she turned to see Yewin there, his face a somber mask.

"She saved my life," he said. "If it hadn't been for her, we could not have established the link."

He was right. While it was Jak that had killed the demons, it would not have been possible without Elva. "We owe her everything," she whispered as two of the Shadow Fae began lowering the woman into her grave. "I never fully understood Elva. She was almost too devoted. That devotion eventually claimed her life. But it saved ours."

Yewin tightened his grip on her shoulder. "We'll find a way to remember her, to remember all of them."

Jak grit her teeth. "The best thing we can do is ensure that no one

else needlessly dies."

The rest of the bodies were placed in their respective graves, and everyone began piling the dirt back on top. But there was one grave that was still empty. A big one.

Jak scanned the area. They didn't have anyone else. Perhaps they had miscalculated.

She caught sight of the troll leader a short distance away, dragging a huge form towards them. Of course, it was for the fallen one-armed troll.

When the troll arrived with his fallen comrade, he laid the corpse into the remaining grave. Without question, Jak stepped up beside the grave, and began shoveling loose dirt back into the pit. Other trolls gathered around them, watching. But they did not participate. None except for the big one, who knelt and shoveled giant handfuls of dirt back into the grave. Jak's contributions were nothing compared to the troll, but she continued until the grave was fully covered.

When it was all over, she stood straight and stared up at the large troll.

"I'm sorry this was necessary," she said, waving a hand at the grave. "It's never easy to lose a friend."

The troll grunted, a sound that appeared to be a confirmation.

"But I'm glad you're on our side," Jak continued. "We're going to need you, I think. And not for fighting."

The troll cocked its head at Jak, not quite understanding.

"I'll have Seph tell you all about Illadar some time. That's our goal, and I think you'll have a part to play, if you're willing."

The troll said nothing, but gave no indication that he disagreed or had any intention of leaving. That was a good sign at least.

"What should I call you?" she asked.

The large beast raised a hand to its chest.

"Yes, you personally," Jak said.

The troll hesitated. Its hand dropped and it looked from one side to the other, staring at its companions as if looking for the answer there.

"You don't know?" Jak guessed.

The troll nodded sharply. Light flashed from its eyes, though not in anger. It looked more like confusion, though Jak was not sure how she could tell. That was the feeling she got from the giant Fae.

"Is it okay if I give you a name?"

It waited, saying nothing. Perhaps that was its way of agreeing.

"If it's alright with you, I'd like to call you Rael."

The troll cocked its head at her again. It was a question.

"Rael was my father, and he meant a lot to me. He protected me, and that sheep that you found, that belonged to him. He was always good at finding the things that were lost. Just like you. I think he

would be honored if you took his name."

The troll straightened. Something in its posture had changed. It turned to the others and growled something she couldn't understand. The others rumbled back something excitedly. Jak smiled as several of the others trolls took steps forward, looking to Jak as if expecting something from her.

"Don't worry, we can find names for all of you eventually."

"Jak," said Skellig's voice from behind her. Jak turned to see the major approaching her at a trot. "And you too, Seph. The council wants an informal meeting to discuss our next steps."

Jak nodded, then turned back to the trolls. "We'll get you all sorted out soon, don't worry. You're among friends now."

Without waiting for a reply, she began following Skellig, though she did not run with her chest wound. Seph followed, staying close beside her, instead of pushing past to catch up with Skellig. Was he making sure she was okay? That was really sweet. Unnecessary, but sweet.

Finally they came next to the river. It wasn't their usual spot, but the river was calmer here, so that made it easier for the Water Fae. As Jak and Seph approached, both Cerai and Amelia emerged, carried by their magical control over the water to where the rest of them stood waiting. Naem was there too, surprisingly. Well, Jak supposed he did represent one of the leaders among them. It made sense to have him there.

"Good, we're all here now," said Skellig. Then, to Jak's surprise, she turned to Naem. "You called this meeting. What did you want to say?"

"Ah," Naem looked at each of them in turn as all eyes stared in his direction. Amelia had her arms folded, probably still distrustful of Naem, but she listened. Naem had saved Jak's life after all. The former Watcher continued, "Well...um, I think you can all agree that what we need most right now are numbers."

"It's one thing, yes," said Skellig. "Our immediate concern is still the queen's army, but speaking long term, we will need more people if we hope to stand a chance against any army, be it human or demon."

"Right, and I have a feeling the queen will not be attacking anytime soon, if ever again," said Naem. Yewin was nodding, which was a good sign. Yewin often had a knack for predicting what would happen in the immediate future.

"Well we already encouraged everyone in the army to join us," said Jak. "Are you suggesting we do something else?"

Naem nodded, "I am. If my guess is correct, most of those soldiers will not come join us. At least not immediately. They'll wait until they have a better chance. Some might need a little additional

encouragement, or assurances that their families will be safe. And they're not the only ones. There are others who would join us."

Gabriel stroked his beard, "You're referring to the ones you brought here and others like them. People that have a higher chance of becoming Fae."

Naem gave a short nod. "There are still many shut up in Skyecliff, including more Water Fae, and I'm sure there are many more at Tradehall and throughout the kingdom who would be sympathetic. I want to recruit as many of them as I can."

"You want to leave?" Jak asked, her eyebrows furrowing. This wasn't because of her, was it, because of what she said?

Naem met her eyes, but the unasked question hung between them. He opened his mouth as if to say something to her, but shut it again and turned to the rest of the council. "I think I, and maybe a few others that we could spare, should recruit who we can. There will be many who are willing, especially when they find out that the queen is singling people out. The family and friends of those people might be willing to join us. And of course…" this time he did meet Jak's eyes. "We have your promise of more brands. That's sure to help."

"I think it's a good idea," said Karlona. Jak turned to her mother. She knew better than anyone, except perhaps Amelia, what Jak and Naem had gone through. Was she encouraging Naem to leave because of that, or because she honestly thought it would help?

"I agree, I don't think you'll find much opposition here, Naem," said Skellig. Had she glanced at Jak when she said that?

"Then I'll ready myself. Anyone you could send with me would be appreciated. We might want to split into two or three groups, to cover more ground."

Skellig nodded to herself, "I have a few in mind. We'll see what we can do."

"I can send a few of the Shadow Fae as well," said Karlona. "Our invisibility helps us get around better than the others, and could probably help you get any remaining Fae out of Skyecliff. And I've been meaning to send a few west anyway, to pick up the remainder of our people in the Hollow Peaks, as well as our Relic."

Jak blinked at her mother. She hadn't told Jak that, but they could probably use that Relic, an original copy of the Annals of Adam. Seph, Yewin, and Gabriel, at least, would be more than eager to read it.

"Very well, but keep as many of the Shadow Fae here as you can," said Skellig. "You're our most skilled warriors, and should we be attacked again, we'll need every one of you."

Karlona acknowledged the advice with a nod.

"So if there's nothing else," Skellig continued. "We need to prepare to move deeper into the pass. Try to find a place that's more

defensible than what we have. And where the Water Fae can live without constantly fighting against the river.

"I actually have one more thing," said Yewin, raising his hand slightly. When everyone waited for him to say more, he continued. "It's a relatively trivial matter, but one that I think will mean a lot to some of us. Concerning the name 'Fae'..."

Girwirt perked up, as if he'd only vaguely been paying attention before now. "We don't like it!" he said for what must have been the hundredth time since they joined the main group.

"Yes, quite," said Yewin patiently. "And I agree that it's become something of a stigma among humanity. I can understand if someone would not want to use it. Though I think it could still be applied to all of us as a whole."

"You have a name for the Bright Fae?" Jak asked.

"I do, it's an ancient word that refers to humans who were particularly powerful. Or possibly enhanced. And given the final fate of one of our beloved comrades..." He looked at Seph. "I thought it appropriate to choose the name, Elves."

Jak opened her mouth as she understood. Elva. Elves. Judging by the way Seph was blinking so rapidly, he probably understood as well. Seph raised a hand to his eyes, wiping away a tear. "I think that would be very appropriate."

"The ancient meaning of the word does make it appropriate," said Gabriel. "I think it's a good choice."

"I'd suggest the same name for others of the Fae, but will leave it up to them." said Yewin. "Especially seeing as some have already chosen names." He nodded at Girwirt and Noralim.

"Elves," said Karlona, testing out the name. "I like it. Perhaps we will use it, though we'll need some way of differentiating ourselves. Shadow or Dark Elves perhaps. A fitting tribute to Elva, and all those who have fallen for our cause."

"I agree," said Jak. "Thank you, Yewin."

Yewin inclined his head but said nothing more.

Skellig looked at each of them, pausing to meet Jak's gaze. "May we do all we can to prevent more deaths like hers." At that remark, each of them stood a little straighter. That was something all of them could get behind. "If there's nothing else, we have to get going. Naem, come talk to me after and I'll introduce you to a few who can travel with you. Karlona, would you come as well?"

Karlona nodded. Skellig surveyed the rest of them. "I know there's a lot for each of us to do, and the worst is far from over. But we've made it this far, and I'm confident that if we were meant to die, it would have happened by now," she glanced at Jak. "Your orders, Jak?"

Jak resisted the impulse to take a step backward, surprised as everyone turned to her. Skellig had already issued the orders, why ask her?

The sun was rising in the east. It was a new dawn, a new opportunity. They were still alive after one horrific night of one trouble after another. They still had hope.

She nodded, “Let’s do it. Let’s find a new home.”

27

It took most of the morning before everyone was ready to move out. No one had come from the queen's army yet, but they had still refrained from attacking. Jak wondered, idly, what the queen was thinking. Had she tried to attack and the army wasn't willing? Or had she sensed that attacking was useless?

They were traveling now, moving in a few miles. There they would leave a few scouts to wait for anyone who wished to join them, while the rest of their group continued until they reached a better place to set up camp for a few days.

Jak had walked with them for an hour or so before her wound and exhaustion finally caught up with her. After she had collapsed, they placed her in one of the wagons for the rest of the trip. Silly. She'd just stumbled. She could keep going if she tried. Instead she was being carried by a very tired horse. That horse looked like it could use a break as much as she did.

Regardless, she dozed off for a while, despite her Sleeplessness brand. Her body needed to heal. She slept, clutching at the Pillar of Eternity, which Naem had finally returned to her. When she awoke, it was already beginning to get dark again. The wagon pulled to a halt.

Even though her muscles still ached, she was feeling much better after the short nap. Perhaps the others had been right to force her to sleep. Maybe. She would never tell them that, though.

She hopped down off of the wagon and went to see what was going on. A quick glance told her that they had come to a slightly larger opening in the canyon. The river continued to rush by at a fast pace, but there was a slight inlet here where the Water Fae could gather.

"This will do," called Skellig to everyone within earshot. "Get ready to set up camp here tonight. Sightseers, position yourselves on either side of us."

"Glad to see you're up and about." Jak whirled to see Seph standing behind her.

"I could have been this whole time," she said. "If Skellig hadn't

insisted."

"I'm sure you're right about that," he said, with a slight wink. "Even if I did see you drooling on your pillow."

She pouted and restrained herself from throwing something at him or wacking him over the head with the Pillar of Eternity.

He looked like he was about to laugh, but the smile slowly faded. "I'm glad you're safe, ultimately. We were worried there. I was worried."

Jak let her face relax. "I know, and you've already lost a lot," she said, speaking of Elva.

Seph sat down on a nearby rocky outcropping. "This is the first time that it's really hit home that people are dying for me. Most of my people survived the attack on Skyecliff, but losing Elva...is this what it's like for you?"

Jak hesitated, then sat down on the rock beside Seph, keeping the Pillar in one hand. "You feel like an imposter? Like you've made a big mistake in letting everyone follow you to their deaths."

"Sort of. I know what I preach is true, but it's becoming more evident what that will mean, the sacrifices we will have to make."

"Yeah, that sounds familiar. I know what I fight for is right, but there are times when I second guess even that, where I wonder, if everyone fights against me, am I truly in the right? But I know I am, and I'm willing to die for that fact. What makes it harder is knowing that others are willing to do the same."

"Yes," Seph said, staring at the ground. "It...it's not easy."

"No, it's not," Jak agreed. She put a hand on his shoulder. He turned, and their eyes met. His gray eyes sparkled in the evening light.

She kissed him. Not a passionate kiss like those she had shared with Naem, not even a long kiss. Just a simple connection, a tender representation of what they both shared. When she finished, she put both arms around his waist, while resting her head on his shoulder. Slowly he placed his own hand around her back. They sat that way for a very long time, saying nothing more. Nothing needed to be said.

"Jak!"

It was her mother, coming at them at a dead run. Jak let go of Seph, rising to her feet. Was it demons? The queen?

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Someone has arrived that you need to see."

Jak glanced back the way they came. "A deserter? I didn't see anyone come in."

"Not a deserter, and he didn't come from the queen's army. He was on the road ahead of us. He said he was waiting for us."

Jak swallowed. Who would have known they were coming? She could only think of one person. Cain.

“Did he attack you? What’s he doing?”

“No, he’s…you have to come see yourself.”

Jak glanced at Seph, who gave her an encouraging nod. She picked up the Pillar of Eternity, gripping it tightly in one hand, before following her mother. Wincing, she ignored the dull ache in her chest as she increased her pace to a mild run. Finally, she arrived at the front of the traveling group, where Skellig, Gabriel, and Yewin already waited with…

No. That brown hair, those clear blue eyes.

The Pillar of Eternity clattered to the ground, the sound echoing through the canyon.

“Marek?”

Epilogue

The queen stormed into her tent. “Fools!” she cried. “What do you mean they won’t attack?”

Her advisor followed her into the tent, sputtering and stammering. “I…I’m sorry, my lady. But we can’t seem to convince them to move against the traitors. Eh…they’re not, uh, directly disobeying your orders, your ladyship. They’re just…uh, slugglish.”

“Sluggish?” Telma spat, “they’re traitors. Treasonous. I will have every last one of them strung up and made an example of. I’ll…”

She broke off at the stunned expression on her aid’s face. He was looking behind her. She spun to see a man standing in the corner, a man with a large build. What the devil? This was her tent. No one but her personal guard were allowed in without her permission.

“Excuse me!” she shouted at the man. She really did not have time for this right now. She began raising a hand to wave the man off. But that was when she realized that she couldn’t lift her arms at all. She couldn’t move a muscle.

The man finally took a few steps out of the shadows. His clothes were modest and clean, but that fact contrasted wildly with the rest of him. Her eyes grew wide. The skin across his entire body looked like it had been blended in a butcher’s meat grinder and spat back out again. He was hideous. Yet now she could see that skin was covered in dark lines, brand lines. His entire body was full of them, just like the multiple brands the girl somehow managed to keep stable, yet this man had far more. Fear touched her like a vice. Why couldn’t she move? Was the man a Telekinetic? With all those brand lines, he must be.

“No witnesses,” he croaked in a dangerous voice. With a sickening snap and a yelp that was unexpectedly cut short, her aid fell to the floor behind her. Most likely dead, though she could not turn her head to make sure.

“Are you here to kill me?” She said, doing her best to maintain a composed tone of voice. ‘Never let the enemy know what you’re truly feeling,’ her father had said.

“No,” he said in that dark tone. She couldn’t help but let out a sigh of relief. But if he wasn’t here to kill her…”

“Who are you? Why are you here?”

“I am Cain,” he said, as if the name should mean something to her. “I believe you and I share a common enemy.”

“Indeed? I have many enemies. The girl, the demons…”

“The demons are my children,” he said in a gravelly tone.

Telma let her mouth go slack. This man led the demons? Well that was easy to believe, given his wretched appearance. But why was he confiding in her?

“I assume you have a reason for telling me this. And for wanting my help.”

“I think we can be of interest to each other,” he confirmed. “What if I were to tell you that I know of a way to get rid of the girl, and all of the Fae, for good.”

“I would say, you have more resources than I. As much as I hate to say it, the Fae are simply too much for me to handle. And that girl has a power that I cannot…”

“I will deal with the girl personally,” the man said. “But you must give me something in return.”

“And what might that be?” she asked, secretly dreading the answer but keeping her face blank.

“Everything.”

To anyone observing the tent from the outside, none would have noticed anything unusual, other than perhaps an uneasy feeling in their bones. Neither sound nor light came out of that tent, restrained by some mysterious form of magic, though all passersby knew it not. Most walked by, completely oblivious to the screams emanating from the queen’s mouth, or the laughter coming from a wretched, demon of a man.

Author's Note

Here we are, finally at the middle of this series. This was a book I was very much looking forward to writing, since it involves Jak becoming fully aware of her true potential, and how dangerous that can be.

Thankfully, she made all the right decisions (for now) and is on her way to being one of the greatest heroes my Argoverse will ever see.

Now I do feel I must apologize for the delay in getting this book out there. The first three books were released within weeks of each other, and then this one took almost five months following book three.

But you will be happy to know that is not a trend I anticipate continuing. In fact, as I write this, I've already completed the first drafts for both book five AND six. I've outlined book seven, and I will start writing it soon. Then there's only book eight, and this series will be finished, and I promise the ending will be epic!

Now, a quick word about that cliffhanger. Again, you'll be happy to know you won't have t wait long to see just what happened to Marek. It's an interesting development in book five, and one I'm honestly not going to say much about. But something is definitely going on, and you'll just have to read the next one to find out, (sorry, I know some of you are probably hating me right now).

That'll do it for book four! I'll hope to see you again soon.

About the Author

Jason Hamilton is an unapologetic nerd of all things science fiction and fantasy. He is the author of the *Roots of Creation* and *Alice: The Last Founder* series, and many other forthcoming novels.

The Argoverse Site
www.argoforce.com
His Personal Site
www.jasonleehamilton.com
Facebook
facebook.com/argoforce
Twitter
twitter.com/storyhobbit
Instagram
instagram.com/storyhobbit
Patreon
patreon.com/storyhobbit
Email
storyhobbit@gmail.com

Also by Jason Hamilton

Roots of Creation

A New Light (short story)
Out of Shadow
Growing Ripples
Through Fire
Into Storm
To World's Above
As Winter Spawns
Seeds of Hope
In Creation's Heart

Alice: The Last Founder

Year One
Ghosts of Greenfield
Taking the Fight